

STRINGS

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Jennifer Koh



5 MINUTES WITH . . . JENNIFER KOH

By Thomas May

Jennifer Koh's commitment to advancing the violin repertoire extends beyond merely commissioning new works. Her prolific tally of premieres (surpassing 100 compositions to date), along with the programs she curates for such organizations as the Kennedy Center, reflects the vitally important role that inclusivity plays in Koh's understanding of her mission as an artist.

This perspective undergirds the various commissioning series that Koh has undertaken—including her acclaimed New American Concerto project. Its inaugural commission resulted in Vijay Iyer's 2017 concerto *Trouble*, the centerpiece of the violinist's latest release (on the Boston Modern Orchestra Project label). Seven

works have appeared so far as parts of the ongoing New American Concerto initiative. Along with Iyer, commissions have gone to Christopher Cerrone (*Breaks and Breaks*), Lisa Bielawa (*Sanctuary*), Courtney Bryan (*Szyggy*), Tyshawn Sorey (*For Marcos Balter*), Missy Mazzoli (*Procession*), and Nina Young (*Traces*).

Koh was the soloist for the world premiere of *Trouble* at the 2017 edition of the Ojai Music Festival, for which Iyer served as music director (the first jazz musician to do so in the festival's history). The six-movement, half-hour-long concerto includes a movement dedicated to Vincent Chin, a Chinese American who was beaten to death in 1982 in a hate crime perpetrated by auto

workers. Koh's new recording of *Trouble* anchors Iyer's eponymous debut album as an orchestral composer, which is conducted by Gil Rose.

Although Iyer (born in 1971) is most widely known for his trailblazing work in the jazz arena, the composer, pianist, and 2013 MacArthur Fellow studied classical violin while growing up and began writing chamber music in his early 30s. Koh persuaded him to face the prospect of writing his first concerto. Writes Iyer: "[She] helped me imagine a quite different form that could speak to what mattered to us as artists of color in the US." Included on the album alongside *Trouble*, whose title Iyer borrowed from the late Congressman John Lewis' famous phrase relating to the power of protest, are the Ellington-inflected *Asunder* (2017), a portrayal of America's divided society, and *Crisis Modes* (2019), a work for strings and percussion.

On the day of the album's release in June, Koh shared her thoughts about the collaboration with Iyer, the uniqueness of his innovative approach to the violin concerto, and the good she hopes *Trouble* will achieve.

What inspired you to launch your New American Concerto project? What are you hoping that it can achieve?

I already know how I think. But if we don't hear and engage with stories and voices that are different from our own experience, it's our loss. And I believe doing so is important for the future of music. We need artists to dream what this world can be, to dream our way into a better future. The New American Concerto project is about hearing the stories and musical voices of *all* Americans and engaging with society today.

I wanted to find a way to use the older form of the concerto to create a conversation with the present. It's especially interesting to do this specifically through the format of a violin concerto, because a larger number of musicians (the first and second violins) play the very same instrument as the soloist. When we deal with this idea of the concerto as storytelling, the questions become: Who is leading and who is following this story? Are you—as the soloist—leading, or are you part of the larger community? Whose vision is directing us toward the future? And whose voices have not been heard?

How do you choose the composers you commission?

I listen for musical voices that are compelling to me and then oftentimes ask for scores so I can see how they notate. The next step is usually hearing their music live and meeting the composer in person. I'm very proud that I've been lucky enough to commission many of them years before they received major awards. What makes me happiest is when I see how they're growing as musicians and artists and when they get the recognition that I believe they deserve.

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How did the collaboration with Vijay Iyer come about?

I was on a grant panel and was impressed by Vijay's imagination and musical voice in a project for the Brentano String Quartet (based on the idea of musical fragments). I waited and came back just over a year later to ask him to write something for my Bridge to Beethoven project, which involves the ten violin sonatas. What I wanted to do with that project was to engage not only with the revolutionary aspect of Beethoven's musical language but also with Beethoven as a human being with political and societal opinions. Vijay wrote *Bridgetower Fantasy* [2015], which looks at the violinist to whom the "Kreutzer" Sonata was originally

dedicated, George Bridgetower, and how he has been written out of history. When you get to concerti, so many people are involved, so that first project allowed me to see how we collaborate.

What, if any, parameters did you set for *Trouble*? How did the idea of addressing discrimination against immigrants through a concerto emerge?

I'm very involved and collaborative in the composition process. Vijay and I had a lot of discussions going into this work about what role the solo violinist can take within the context of a concerto. The piece traces an emotional journey that we all go through as individuals, where words are not necessarily needed. The beginning bursts out of a kind of primordial sludge. It sounds like alchemy: this magical thing of having the music become a part of you. But then, by extension, a larger number of people's voices can flow within you as a musician, and these voices can be communicated. I think of the third movement, the one dedicated to Vincent Chin, as the heart of the entire piece.

That relationship with the community seems to come to the fore in the final movement—much longer than the other five—which is titled "Assembly." Does that lead to something more hopeful?

Yes, absolutely. "Assembly" explores experiences and stories that we didn't know about before and does have a kind of joy, because it is about bringing everybody together and going toward that future that has been dreamed. The role of the violin shifts there. It becomes very much a part of that movement versus being just soloistic throughout.

What have you found especially fulfilling about the New American Concerto project? What do you hope it achieves?

I hope lots of people will also engage with this music. It's been an incredibly liberating process to work with these composers. For example, it has liberated me to engage with much older works like Beethoven through a contemporary lens. The great thing about doing these larger, long-term projects is that they grow with you—you evolve with the music and the ideas evolve over time. And I think that's the [nature of] music itself. ■