

## No Exit: a conversation with composer Emily Koh

by Mike Telin



Composers never know how and when they will find inspiration for a new work. For Emily Koh it was during a visit to a museum. “I was walking around the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and a painting by Esphyr Slobodkina caught my attention,” Koh said during a recent telephone conversation. “Her pieces are abstract, colorful, and angular — all the things I find interesting, not only in music, but in art and sculpture as well.”

On Saturday, February 4 at 8:00 at SPACES Gallery, [No Exit](#) will present the world premiere of [Emily Koh](#)’s *esphyr*, performed by violinist Cara Tweed, pianist Nicholas Underhill, and percussionist Luke Rinderknecht. The concert will also include Lou Harrison’s *Suite for Solo Piano* (tribute to Arnold Schoenberg), Christopher Deane’s *Mourning Dove Sonnet* for vibraphone, Nicholas Underhill’s *Habanera for violin*, and George Antheil’s *Violin Sonata No. 2*. The program will be repeated on Monday, February 6 at Cleveland State University’s Drinko Auditorium, and on Saturday, February 11 at Heights Arts. Both concerts begin at 8:00 pm.

Koh began working on *esphyr* by sketching some of her musical ideas using brightly colored writing utensils. “The piece is not written in graphic notation, but the map was full of straight lines and angular movements,” she said.

Born in 1986, Koh is the recipient of awards from ASCAP, Prix D’Été, and PARMA. She has received commissions from the Barlow Endowment for Music Composition, Composers Conference at Wellesley College, Singapore Symphony Orchestra, and Left Coast Chamber Ensemble, and has been

awarded grants from New Music USA, Women's Philharmonic Advocacy, and Artistic Excellence (Paul Abisheganaden Grant). A graduate of the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, NUS, and the Peabody Institute at Johns Hopkins University, Koh is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Music Composition and Theory at Brandeis University.

Koh has found her success as a composer surprising. "I always thought of myself as going to conservatory to become an orchestral bass player. In high school, I had one composition class which made me think that maybe I should consider writing music. When I applied to college I also sent in a composition application, so I guess you could say the rest was history."

Even with her busy schedule in North America, Emily Koh finds the time to stay in touch with her family in Singapore. "I visit my parents and grandparents as often as possible," she said. "I've also had a lot of performances of my pieces there, which I am very thankful for. The fact that people are interested in hearing my music is very humbling."

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