

## Oberlin Contemporary Music Ensemble at the Cleveland Museum of Art, April 9

by Mike Telin



Described by *The New York Times* as “a hotbed of contemporary-classical players” and a “rural experimental haven,” Oberlin College and Conservatory will exemplify those quotes when it plays host to a week-long residency by Oberlin alum violinist [Jennifer Koh](#) and composer, jazz pianist, and writer [Vijay Iyer](#).

The week will culminate in a performance by the Oberlin Contemporary Music Ensemble under the direction of Timothy Weiss on Sunday, April 9 at 2:00 pm. The concert, in Gartner Auditorium at the [Cleveland Museum of Art](#), will include Clint Needham’s *Chamber Symphony* as well as a workshop performance of *Trouble*, Vijay Iyer’s new concerto for violin and chamber orchestra. The program will also be presented in Oberlin’s Warner Concert Hall on Friday, April 7 at 8:00 pm.

Written specifically for Jennifer Koh, Iyer’s Concerto was co-commissioned by the Ojai Music Festival, Cal Performances at the University of California, Berkeley, and the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Andris Nelsons, music director. The world premiere performance takes place at the Ojai Music Festival in California on Thursday, June 8, 2017.

In addition to rehearsing the concerto and presenting master classes, Koh and Iyer will participate in discussion sessions in Oberlin. On Tuesday, April 4, Koh will join Hispanic Studies professor Claire Solomon and English professor Sandy Zagarell for “Curating Encounters with the Unknown: A Literary and Musical Conversation,” which will center on questions of literary and musical interpretation. On Thursday, April 6,

Koh and Iyer will team up for a conversation called “Diversity in the Arts” about how they use their music to tackle the difficult subject matter of racial violence. To read more about the residency activities, click [here](#).

“It’s great for all of us to have Vijay and Jenny on campus to give birth to a new piece,” Timothy Weiss said during an interview. “It’s treacherous and scary, but exciting. While the preview performances are for the public, they too are part of the workshop process. And I think that pairing the new concerto with Clint Needham’s piece is great. He’s such an accomplished composer, and he’s local.”

Weiss pointed out that this week is not the first time that Jennifer Koh has sought the assistance of her alma mater when she has wanted to workshop a piece. “It all started when she had been engaged to play the Ligeti Concerto with orchestras around the world. She had never performed it, so she called and said, ‘Tim, let’s do it.’ We played it here and then in New York at Merkin Hall. That was very good for us because we were performing a giant of contemporary music.”

Koh also returned to Oberlin while she was preparing to perform Lutoslawski’s *Chain 2* with orchestras including the New York Philharmonic. “When she called and asked if we could workshop the Iyer here, of course I said yes, but we would need to perform the piece twice,” Weiss said.

Although the Concerto is finished and the music was delivered a few weeks back, Weiss said that does not mean that revisions won’t be made. “That is the idea of a workshop, and it is possible that the piece people will hear at Ojai could be slightly different. I imagine that might include slight adjustments to orchestration, tempo, or dynamics.”

Weiss said that the Concerto begins with a Prelude — a minute of delicately oscillating improvisations in the piano and solo violin, with the alto flute playing a simple, almost modal melody. The Prelude is followed by four separate parts and an interlude without solo violin.

“Rhythmically the piece is difficult, although the skeleton of the music is very understandable — you can hear it cycling in common-phrase units of fours, sixes, and eights. But finding the groove is really hard.”

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