

## Kent/Blossom Festival: a conversation with Kulas Guest Artist Jennifer Koh

by Mike Telin



Violinist Jennifer Koh is fascinating. Born in Chicago of Korean parents, she made her debut with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra at age 11. In 1994, while she was pursuing a degree in English Literature at Oberlin, she won the International Tchaikovsky Competition.

After furthering her musical studies at Curtis, the violinist began carving a career path that has led to collaborations with artists from many disciplines, and creating projects that bridges music from all eras — traditional to contemporary. She has also premiered more

than 60 works written especially for her.

This week [Jennifer Koh](#) will return to Northeast Ohio as this year's [Kent Blossom Music Festival](#) Kulas Guest Artist. On Wednesday, June 28, at 7:30 pm in Ludwig Recital Hall, Koh will perform a solo violin recital featuring J.S. Bach's *Sonata No. 2 in a*, BWV 1003 and the *Partita No. 2 in d*, BWV 1004. Her program will also include Missy Mazzoli's *Dissolve*, *O My Heart*, and Luciano Berio's *Sequenza VIII*. As part of her three-day residency she will present free masterclasses that are open to the public on Tuesday and Thursday (times to be announced).

On June 5, WQXR's Q2 premiered Koh's new online series, during which she talks with composers who contributed works for solo violin to her "Shared Madness" project. The project explores the meaning of virtuosity on the violin in the 21st century, just the same as Paganini's set of 24 Caprices did at the beginning of the 19th century. Guest composers include Matthew Aucoin, Bryce Dessner, Samuel Adams, Anthony Cheung, Missy Mazzoli, Daniel Bjarnason, David Lang, Andrew Norman, Kaija Saariaho, Augusta Read Thomas, and Julia Wolfe. Click [here](#) to stream episodes.

Koh, who was named *Musical America's* 2016 Instrumentalist of the Year, thrives on the collaborative process that drives the creation of new works. “I find working with composers to be liberating,” she said during an interview this past April in Oberlin. The violinist and composer Vijay Iyer were in town to spend a week at the Conservatory workshopping his new violin concerto with the school’s Contemporary Music Ensemble.

Iyer’s concerto, *Trouble*, is part of Koh’s “Mixtape” project which explores the role of the violin concerto in contemporary American culture. The work received its world premiere at the Ojai Festival on June 8. Koh will premiere two more concertos that are part of the project in the next year — the first by Andrew Norman, on October 14 with the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, and the second, by Chris Cerrone, with the Detroit Symphony on May 25 of 2018.

Why was Vijay Iyer the right composer for Koh’s concerto project? “There are certain people I want to work with,” she said. “And you do develop an instinct for this.” *Trouble* is the third collaboration between the violinist and composer — his *Bridgetower Fantasy* is part of her “Bridge to Beethoven” project and *Zany, Cute, Interesting* is part of “Shared Madness”.

“For *Bridgetower Fantasy*, I used a rhythmic motive from the last movement of Beethoven’s “Kreutzer” sonata,” said Iyer, who joined Koh and me for the first part of the conversation in Oberlin. “I find that people keep asking me to compose works that answer back to the classical repertoire — what would happen if we asked this Indian-American jazz pianist to write something? Thinking back in history and updating it is happening a lot in the classical community.”

When it came time to begin working on their new concerto, and after a lot of conversation about current events, Koh and Iyer knew they wanted to use the opportunity to address the uncomfortable subject of discrimination. An event that Koh recalled during their conversations was the murder of [Vincent Chin](#) — a 27-year-old Chinese-American man who was beaten to death with a baseball bat by two white auto industry workers in the Detroit suburb of Highland Park in 1982. “I was young at the time, but I remember how much this event [frightened] the Asian community,” Koh said. A movement of the Concerto is dedicated to Vincent Chin.

“The historical importance of that particular event, and what it meant to Jenny and other Asian-Americans is she’s able to feel the music,” Iyer said. “It’s not just a gimmick or an exploitive use of someone’s life — it’s real.”

Iyer said the concerto’s title, *Trouble*, is inspired by Georgia Congressman and civil rights activist John Lewis. “He uses the term ‘necessary trouble,’ which is what gives the

piece its name.”

Current events have caused Koh to explore her heritage as a Korean-American a subject documented in “[The 38th Parallel](#)” project, set to premiere during the 2018–2019 season. The one-hour multimedia work was created in collaboration with the French composer and multimedia artist Jean-Baptiste Barrière. The work draws upon their shared personal connections to Korea. Koh’s mother was a refugee from North Korea during the Korean war and her father is from Seoul. Barrière’s first musical experiences came by way of his grandmother’s Korean partner — whom he considered his grandfather — who disappeared during an attempt to return to North Korea in the 70s.

“I’ve been thinking about this for a long time,” Koh said. “As a little kid I did go back to Korea in the summer, but there’s a lot that I don’t remember very well.”

The contrast between her life and that of Barrière’s is something that Koh finds interesting. “I’m sure most people would assume that I was the one who understood Korean music. I’m an American from Chicago. I grew up with the Chicago Symphony and the Lyric Opera. That was my musical world. Jean-Baptiste grew up with Korean music and knows more about it than I do.”

I asked Jennifer Koh about the “Arco Collaborative,” an artist-driven nonprofit she founded to help nurture collaborations and commissions and transform the creative process. “As long as you don’t use the word entrepreneurship,” she said. The Collaborative invests in the future by cultivating artist-citizens in partnership with educational organizations.

Koh explained that classical music tends to be presented in two specific ways — there are orchestras and there are organizations that only present recitals.

“I started ‘Arco Collaborative’ to create a community where artists could develop ideas that didn’t fit inside those boxes. When you’re creating a new work the performance is only 2% of the process. When you’re working with a composer there’s a lot of discussion — going back and forth over different drafts and passages. Classical musicians also have an opportunity to show that we care about diversity and are engaged with the world around us. And we show that with the composers that we commission and the performers we engage.”

Wrapping up our conversation, we turn to the topic of music criticism, and the important role that journalists play in providing exposure for young and emerging composers and performers.

Koh's win at the Tchaikovsky did give her an advantage with the press early in her career. "I came out of the competition world, but that doesn't make me special," Koh said. "But when I was playing these crazy concerts at the Miller Theater, the *New York Times* helped me because they *were* covering me. What I fear is that with the continued decrease in coverage the next generation of artists who are doing creative things that are not in the establishment are not going to have the support or exposure they need. The press is the only way for their voices to be heard. Even if you don't get a good review, you see that somebody is paying attention. Of course there's social media, but people need an established voice in order to learn about what is out there."

The violinist added that having a good relationship with a presenter is also important in the development of a career. "George Steel, who was the director of the Miller Theater back then, took a chance on me. The first thing I did was John Zorn's violin concerto and George was wonderful because he kind of gave me carte blanche after that. I remember I would call him and say 'I have this wild idea,' and it was wonderful to have a presenting partner like him who was willing to take risks with me and give me support to do it. That was huge."

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