

JENNIFER KOH

# *‘Being a performer is about going into the world of the composer’*

A decade and a half after her career-launching performance of the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto in Russia, US violinist Jennifer Koh has returned to the work in a new recording. She tells **Gavin Dixon** how her approach to the concerto is informed by her collaborations with living composers

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NOVEMBER 2016 THE STRAD 43



## JENNIFER KOH

Jennifer Koh and Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky go back a long way. In 1992, at the age of 15, Koh performed the Violin Concerto in Moscow as a finalist in the International Tchaikovsky Competition for Young Musicians. Two years later she returned, again performing the concerto, to take top prize in the main competition. The win launched her career, but she has diversified in the years since then, and is best known today for her performances of contemporary music and her innovative commissioning projects. But the Tchaikovsky has remained in her repertoire, and she has now recorded it for the first time, teaming up again with conductor Alexander Vedernikov, her partner at the 1992 competition, and with the Odense Symphony, with which she also first performed as a teenager.

‘Looking back now, I’m so appreciative’, Koh recalls, ‘because I was really a kid and they were so kind to me, both the orchestra and Vedernikov. But then I didn’t see Vedernikov again for more than 20 years, until we met up two years ago to play the Tchaikovsky Concerto again, with the NHK Symphony in Tokyo. And, of course, we had changed so much as people, and as musicians, but there was that initial link that we still felt – that musical connection. So we decided we should record it. I had resisted recording traditional repertoire for a long time, and for many years I was sheepish about admitting I liked the Tchaikovsky – I do a lot of thornier stuff. But it just felt like now was the right time. I found it hard to resist.’

The Tchaikovsky Concerto is a core classic today, but it has a troubled history. Leopold Auer, for whom it was written in 1878, thought the solo part unidiomatic and refused to perform it. The premiere was eventually given in 1881 by Adolph Brodsky in Vienna, where it was poorly received. Auer later returned to the concerto, producing his own edition, with extensive cuts. And throughout the 20th century a suspicion remained that the concerto was overly repetitious and poorly structured, leading many violinists to favour Auer’s version.

Not Koh. ‘Everybody talks about the premiere of the concerto, and how people said it was unplayable, hence the cuts. But a big part of my life has been dedicated to working with living composers, so I see the effort that goes into writing a piece of music. Being a performer is about going into the world of the composer, to understand their unique vision. So I don’t take the traditional cuts in the Tchaikovsky Concerto because

CHRISTINA WALKER



they compromise something fundamental about who Tchaikovsky was. He gives his performers this beautiful space; he allows them to go on a journey. I see it as a metaphor for life – you might return to the same apartment, day in, day out, for decades. But we have experiences in between those times, and they change our perception each time we return. So, although Tchaikovsky repeats thematic material, he gives space to the performer and to the listener. It’s a journey, and every time you return to a theme the experience changes slightly.’

That is just as true for Koh’s continuing relationship with the concerto, and her approach to it has altered considerably since her teenage years. ‘The main thing that has changed is that I don’t believe in prettiness now. I believe in expressivity, so I wasn’t looking to make a pretty sound on the Tchaikovsky CD. There are plenty of beautiful recordings out there, but what is beautiful to me is the fragility of Tchaikovsky’s music, his recognition that we are not all flawless and perfect all the time. The other thing now is that I don’t see the Tchaikovsky as virtuosic at all. Of course there are things that are technically difficult, but that is the reason I practise, to push this stuff aside and focus on the expressive content.’



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The title of the new CD is *Tchaikovsky: Complete Works for Violin and Orchestra*, and the programme is rounded out by the *Sérénade mélancolique*, *Valse-Scherzo* and the *Souvenir d'un lieu cher*, in an orchestration by Alexander Glazunov. ‘I have a great love for the *Sérénade mélancolique*,’ says Koh. ‘There is something about it, in its simplicity, that is so moving, really touching to me. The same can be said for *Souvenir d'un lieu cher*. The *Méditation* that opens the work was the original draft of the Violin Concerto’s second movement. Tchaikovsky discarded it and replaced it with the *Canzonetta*. So you actually have thematic material from the Concerto in the *Souvenir*.’

But Koh has no doubt that Tchaikovsky was right to replace the movement. ‘The first movement is quite intense, and the *Méditation* is also quite dark. The *Canzonetta* is lighter, so it makes a more even transition into the third movement. And then in the *Souvenir*, the *Méditation* is followed by the scherzo, which is quite light – I mean light for Tchaikovsky. With his work, even when there is a smile there is a tear in the eye, and there is something very beautiful about that.’

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Since the Tchaikovsky Competition, Koh has branched out into a diverse range of musical projects, but these reflect an open-minded spirit that was already in place when she first travelled to Moscow. ‘At the time, I was a literature major in college,’ she remembers. ‘I was obsessed with everything Russian – with Tolstoy, Anna Akhmatova, Mandelstam. And also Russian history was completely fascinating to me. I think Tchaikovsky was an extension of the obsession with Russian culture I was going through.’

‘Literature was always part of my life,’ Koh continues, and it has had a profound influence on her art and her outlook on the world. ‘My mother was born in North Korea under the Japanese occupation. They escaped but she and her family lost everything. They knew real hunger. I found it difficult to connect with their experience, but the way I came to an understanding was through art. At the time, there was not a lot of translated work from Korean in English. The only access I had to these kinds of experiences was through Holocaust literature. But music also played an important role. It was an extension of that understanding for me at the time, and was really a solace. So music was a way of expression ▶



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and a way of coming to an understanding. Music and literature are the ways that I came to an understanding of the world.'

From her English studies at Oberlin College, Koh moved on to the Curtis Institute, where she was mentored by the legendary Viennese violinist Felix Galimir. Koh had first worked with Galimir at the Marlboro Festival. 'I took an audition in New York,' she remembers, 'and he heard me and said, "You need to come to Marlboro." I didn't come from a musical family, I had no idea what the Marlboro Festival was, but I went, and I learnt a great deal. Not just from Felix: it was the first time I saw how musicians work together, people from completely different musical backgrounds. It was a magical learning experience.'

Galimir, who died in 2010, had been a member of the Vienna Philharmonic between the wars. He had also worked with many of the great composers of the day, including Schoenberg, Berg, Webern and Ravel. 'That was amazing for me, because I studied the Berg Concerto with him and we played the Schoenberg Second Quartet together.' Galimir instilled a sense that, even here, expression is key. 'I remember at the time everybody was treating contemporary music very clinically. This was in the 1990s, and he would sing these lyrical phrases, in Webern or in the Schoenberg Second Quartet. What I learnt was that everything is about expressivity.' And Galimir's Viennese traditions live on in Koh's playing. 'I played the Bruch Concerto with the Philadelphia Orchestra and Christoph Eschenbach. Afterwards, a couple of players in the orchestra came up to me and said, "You sound like an old Jewish man in an Asian female body." And it's true, because I grew up in the belief that that is how the piece should be played.'

Koh says that when she and Galimir played in string quartets, 'Felix would never play first violin in anything, only second. And I learnt very quickly from him that being a great musician has nothing to do with how you play technically, or even about which part you're playing. Being a great musician is about how you listen and respond. For example in a string quartet it was about the chords, and the musical impulse and the phrasing.'

The other great mentor in her early career was the Bolivian violinist Jaime Laredo, an influential teacher whose other former students include Pamela Frank, Hilary Hahn and Leila Josefowicz. 'The greatest thing Jaime gave me was that he never told me what to do. As a teacher he was never a dictator. Working with him, you are not just dealing with a musician; it is more like having a conversation with a human being.'

That conversation continues today, and recently resulted in an album, *Two x Four*, featuring Koh and Laredo in double violin concertos by Bach, Anna Clyne, Philip Glass and David Ludwig. 'I wanted to explore the




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idea of the passing of performance traditions. Jaime was a student of Josef Gingold, himself a student of Ysaÿe. So when I was studying the Ysaÿe sonatas he would say, for example, "Oh they never fixed this, you're supposed to actually play these extra four bars here." So that was always interesting, that passing-down of knowledge, and I wanted to explore that idea.' But they also found they had different ideas about Bach when they recorded the Double Concerto. 'Jaime was great because his playing is always about giving everyone space and making sure that everything is audible. But Jaime played the piece quite differently. In the end he said, "OK, we can do your tempo in the first movement if we can do my tempo in the second!" And we worked the whole piece out like that.'

'I think there is never a single, ultimate approach to any work,' she continues. 'There are great performances and interpretations that have moved me, but it's the diversity and multiplicity of voices that interests me.' Diversity is a common theme in Koh's career. In addition to her performing and recording schedules she also curates new music projects, typically commissioning a number of composers to write works around a common theme. In one of the most recent, *Shared Madness*, Koh invited composers to respond to Paganini's *Caprices*. Remarkably, the whole project was a fundraising exercise ▶

CHRIS LEE





Koh (centre) with some of the composers participating in the Shared Madness project

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with the aim of helping Koh buy her violin. ‘I had been fundraising for a new instrument for eight years,’ Koh explains. ‘Let’s just say it was not easy. I was carrying half the debt for four years, with a lot of interest on it. It was killing me. There was a lot of pressure. But I reached out to Elizabeth and Justus Schlichting, who offered to give me the money in the form of a loan. Their main interest is in commissioning new works: that is the focus of their philanthropic life. So they offered to do an exchange for commissions. The composers I approached are my community of people; they are my friends and a lot of them knew what I had been going through. When I called them up, I always began by saying that they were free to say no; I usually don’t believe in asking artists to do things for free. But I was shocked, because almost everyone I asked said yes.’

The Paganini theme came from a discussion with the composer Kaija Saariaho. ‘My first idea was something around Bach. But Saariaho’s response was: “Too heavy for composers! Too much pressure!” So I thought instead about Paganini, and we decided to do it around the idea of virtuosity in the 21st century. The composers were interested in the Paganini, but also in how the tactile relationship between an audience and an instrument was very different at that time. Musical instruments were once the pinpoint source in the home for entertainment, but that has radically changed. So in Paganini’s time people would know that fingered octaves are hard, for example, but less so today. So is that still virtuosic? What is virtuosic now? Some composers approached virtuosity through extended techniques; others saw it as being about phrasing, or character, or the ability to be a chameleon, to be able to shift into each composer’s world. Others explored the idea of pianissimo. That’s what I found interesting – that there were numerous

CHRIS LEE

points of inspiration. That sense of curiosity really spoke to me.’

For her latest project Koh is broadening her horizons and applying that curiosity beyond the classical world. Mixtape will be a series of works for violin and orchestra, but she is reluctant to call them concertos – that’s too traditional for what she has in mind. ‘I wanted to look at the issue of how classical music has become so separated from contemporary culture. In theatre and in dance we often see collaborations with contemporary art forms, so I don’t understand why we don’t have more of that in classical music. When you look at jazz, or rap, or hip-hop, there are many truly great artists, but they are not working in our art form. So I started thinking: why are we not friends? Why are we not in touch with what is happening? Coming from a background where everyone plays classical music, it is not clear how what we do serves our community. We need to reflect the diversity of the cities we live in.’

Koh believes classical music can learn from the immediacy and social engagement of other music forms. ‘You must have read about Black Lives Matter here in the US. What is remarkable to me is that rap music in the 90s was already addressing the issue of police brutality. They used the art form to communicate what was happening before anybody else was paying attention. We need to draw on that idea of art being embedded in communities. I have commissioned a work from Vijay Iyer that will include elements of hip-hop in the musical form. It is all about integrating and acknowledging other art forms and showing how important and vital they are to our society. And I’ll be working with Chris Cerrone, who is engaging with the techno movement that began in Detroit. These ideas are important to me because these are elements of what’s been happening in my lifetime.’

Koh’s schedule for the coming months is typically eclectic: solo recitals, concerto appearances – including Mozart and Tchaikovsky – and, of course, many contemporary works and premieres, including the world premiere of a new concerto by Christopher Rountree. From Koh’s description, it sounds demanding. ‘He is playing with extremes in performance art. He uses these square boxes – aleatoric notation – where each of us plays independently. When a player reaches a certain pitch or rhythmic pattern, then they move on to the next box. I love this kind of acknowledgement by composers that no two performances are ever the same.’ ●



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