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Jennifer Koh

The art of collaboration & creativity

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Jennifer Koh

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Unconventional violinist connects past and present with plenty of plans for the future

By Rory Williams

Amid clattering dishes, waiters' inquiries, and occasional outbursts by children, Jennifer Koh pushes her tea to the side, leans over the table, and apologizes. "I've never seen it at this hour when normal people go out to eat," she says, eyeing the patrons and staff of a busy Manhattan café from behind stage makeup that's still caked to her face from a filming session just hours earlier.

She's deep into the 6:30 dinner rush in a modestly hip establishment in Washington Heights, a residential neighborhood preferred by classical artists because of its quick access to Lincoln Center and prewar apartments with thick walls for undisturbed practicing.

Koh usually dines at 11 PM.

Concerts and social commitments keep her up, as was the case the previous night after giving the US premiere of Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho's *Frisés* coupled with a performance of the Bach Partita No. 2 at the Miller Theatre at Columbia University. In exchange for the 4:30 AM bedtime is a 10 AM wakeup call and generally quieter cafés.

This depends on the time zone, of course. In the four weeks leading up to our meeting, Koh had engagements in Tokyo, Milwaukee, and Dusseldorf before landing back at her base in New York for recording. In the days ahead, she would be packing for a five-week tour touching down in Aspen, France, Berlin, Helsinki, Santa Fe, and Los Angeles.

It's the upside-down, harried life of an artist, the complexities of which she's sharing in her new online video series *Jennifer Koh: Off Stage, On Record* (the series is sponsored by *Strings* magazine).

"When I was young, I had so many questions, and this series is about exploring all of the different aspects offstage," says Koh, 37, who debuted with the Chicago Symphony at age 11 and later won the International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow, the Concert Artists Guild Competition, and the Avery Fisher Career Grant in the 1994–95 season at age 17. "People only see you when you're onstage, but 99.9 percent of the work is when you're not onstage. Being a musician is 24 hours a day—I want to show people those things I had no idea about."

'Allowing yourself to do things that might terrify you is an important part of being alive.'

—Jennifer Koh



Koh, looking just as comfortable in her hoodie as she had been in her strapless black Oscar de la Renta gown during the Miller concert, explains that in the first season of *Off Stage, On Record*, she'll devote five minutes each to six topics: "Creativity" and "Collaboration," with regard to both musicians and composers; "The Juggle," which addresses prepping for concerts, performing, establishing a nonprofit, and fundraising; "Recording"; "The Team," which refers to an artist's manager, publicist, donors, and presenters; and "Body," which describes travel, rest, exercise, and diet.

The series is one of the many initiatives of a new nonprofit that Koh is establishing called MusicBridge, which will also support both continuing and new collaborations with artists of diverse disciplines in and outside of classical music. Creatively, Koh has been fueled by an intense intellectual curiosity, and immerses herself in the oeuvres of living and dead composers, making connections to past and present in her artistic decisions. "Each composer informs the others," Koh says. "It doesn't matter what time they came from."

This has been the underlying theme in Koh's body of work and is central to "Bach and Beyond," a three-part recital series in which she pairs contemporary and newly commissioned works with Bach's Six Sonatas and Partitas.

This spring, she was scheduled to premiere the third recital, which includes Bach's Sonatas Nos. 2 and 3, the Berio *Sequenza VIII*, John Zorn's *Passagen*, and a new work by John Harbison. She began the series in the 2009–10 season with Bach's Partitas Nos. 2 and 3, Ysaÿe's Sonata No. 2, Saariaho's *Nocturne for Violin*, Carter's *Fantasy*, and Esa Pekka Salonen's "Lachen Verlernt." The second recital in the 2010–11 season featured Bach's Sonata No. 1 and Partita No. 1, Bartók's Sonata for solo violin, and a partita commissioned from Phil Kline called *Dead Reckoning*.

The series is being produced by Cedille Records, which released *Bach & Beyond, Part I* in 2012. The album features the partitas, Ysaÿe, and Saariaho works as well as Missy Mazzoli's "Dissolve O My Heart," commissioned for Koh by the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

"I had heard [Koh] play Bach at Miller Theatre and was immediately impressed by her elegance and preternatural calm," Mazzoli says. "She seemed to be so completely inside the music that it was almost as if she was on a different plane than the audience, that she was allowing us a glimpse into her inner world."

Presenting this inner world before an audience is no easy task. "When you're in the arts, you need access to all sides of yourself at all times," Koh says. "Certain pieces and certain works call upon accessing both dark and light sides of yourself, and artists have to live with that polarity and duality all the time. That's why people listen to music—to connect with emotions that they don't have access to on a daily basis."

Having performed all of the Bach Sonatas and Partitas in a marathon concert, Koh has shown complete command of the repertoire. So absorbed was she during the Partita No. 2 performance at the Miller Theatre, she was nearly hopping while vigorously bowing her violin.

So it came as a surprise during a post-concert interview when she told the audience that she felt vulnerable—naked even—when performing the Bach solo works, concluding: "It is terrifying."

Terror is a word she uses quite frequently in interviews, but it has played an important role in her progression as an artist. After winning the Tchaikovsky Competition, for example, she made the bold move of placing her concertizing career on hold to earn a bachelor's degree in English literature from Oberlin College before studying at the Curtis Institute with violinists Jaime Laredo and Felix Galimir.

"[Oberlin] was an environment in which I was free to fail," Koh says. "But it's important to take risks—otherwise, you're only going to see option A or option B. You need to be able to see an entire world of possibilities—to look at a phrase and see more than one way to play it—and to take that risk. Allowing yourself to do things that might terrify you is an important part of being alive."

The risk allowed Koh to develop a passion for literature and French symbolist poetry, which has in turn informed collaborative

artistic decisions with Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Jennifer Higdon and Anna Clyne, a highly praised young New York-based composer. Higdon's lyrical sonata *String Poetic*, which was premiered in 2006 and released on Cedille in 2008, was explicitly commissioned by Koh for this purpose. Following suit was Higdon's *Singing Rooms*, a concerto for violin with chorus, which premiered in 2007 as part of a co-commission by the Philadelphia, Minnesota, and Atlanta symphony orchestras with a Telarc release in 2010.

"The beauty of being aware of someone's gift on an instrument is to be able to dream big as a composer," says Higdon, who got to know Koh while teaching at Curtis. "There's actually more freedom to create all kinds of musical challenges and interesting textures and gestures. One of the things that these two works share thematically is Ms. Koh's love of poetry and her intense interest in it. Both pieces have many different moods, as if these are collections of poems."

At press time, the New York premiere of *Singing Rooms* was scheduled for April 29 at Carnegie Hall with the New York Choral Society.

When Clyne and Koh met for the first time over tea and cake in New York's West Village, the two discussed their affinity for the French poet Charles Baudelaire, whose *L'Albatros* ("The Albatross") later became the inspiration for *Prince of Clouds*, a double concerto that Clyne wrote for Koh and Curtis mentor Laredo to perform alongside Bach's Double Concerti for two violins as part of their 2X4 project.

"At the heart of a true artist collaboration is a deep sense of trust and a desire to keep moving forward, to try new things," Clyne says. "One of the aspects of Jennifer's musicianship that I find most striking is her ability to express music that ranges from earthy and vigorous textures to delicate soaring sonorities—and both with equal intensity."

Intensity is certainly felt throughout the aforementioned 2X4 project, which is named for two violinists (Koh and Laredo) and four works for two violins and orchestra. The programs include Bach's Double Concerti for two violins; Philip Glass' *Echorus* for two violins and string orchestra; *Prince of Clouds*, which premiered in 2012 with the IRIS Orchestra in Memphis; and

David Ludwig's *Seasons Lost*, which premiered earlier that year with the Delaware Symphony.

"Jenny has something that is this intangible thing that you can't put your finger on," Laredo says over the phone. "You can't teach it—you're born with it. And she had it, still has it, and always will. I believed in her from the beginning."

The relationship between mentor and mentee is strong, and Laredo is quick to point out that he now views Koh as a consummate colleague. "He had faith in me even before I had faith in myself," Koh says. "There's something beautiful in there, that kind of support and empathy."

This spring, Koh and Laredo planned to perform 2X4 with the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra and Alabama Symphony Orchestra, and Cedille was scheduled to release a 2X4 album featuring Koh and Laredo with the Curtis Chamber Orchestra.

But Koh's partnerships extend beyond composers and musicians. At the moment, she's working with filmmaker and video artist Tal Rosner on "Ligeti Synergy," in which they are developing a visual dimension to the György Ligeti Violin Concerto, and that they are planning to premiere in 2016.

"We chose this particular work because this music really manages to capture every side of humanity," Koh says in a promotional video. "It captures the most intimate, delicate, and fragile sides of who we are as well as the most extreme parts of who we are as human beings."

'The beauty of being aware of someone's gift on an instrument is to be able to dream big as a composer.'

—Jennifer Higdon

Their previous work focused on the creation of a video component to Salonen's *Lachen Verlernt* (from *Bach and Beyond*), which was presented at the 2010 Tribeca Film Festival and is included on her 2009 Cedille album *Rhapsodic Musings: 21st Century Works for Solo Violin*.

Koh also is planning another collaborative effort with playwright and director Robert Wilson, who chose her to play Einstein in the critically acclaimed recent third revival of *Einstein on the Beach*, with music by Philip Glass, as part of a celebration of Glass' 75th birthday. "We'll be staging all six sonatas and partitas for violin in a literal staged-theater production," Koh says. "It will follow the life of Johann Sebastian Bach, paralleling the birth, development, and evolution of an artist's life."

Meeting Wilson has been one of the joys of Koh's life. "Every second of his life is dedicated to art work," she says. "As soon as I saw how he worked, and the dedication and professionalism that he has, I completely understood him, like we were kindred spirits."

Wilson's work has inspired Koh to create MusicBridge to give artists the freedom to create without parameters. In addition to *Off Stage, On Record*, the next big undertaking for the organization will be the *Bridge Beethoven* project, which will feature musicians who come from different nonmusical, cultural, and racial backgrounds.

The project hits close to home for Koh, whose supportive Korean parents were regular Chicago Symphony and Lyric Opera ticket holders while she grew up in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, but were nevertheless non-musicians.

"When I came up with the idea, a lot of people advised me not to do it because, they said, 'You're not known as the Beethoven player,'" Koh says. "I replied: 'If I was a German violinist, you would think that was the most natural project for me to do.' That dialogue made me think: 'Who does this music actually belong to?'"

Koh and pianist Shai Wosner, who recorded 2013's *Signs, Games + Messages* (Cedille) together, are commissioning Vijay Iyer, an American jazz pianist-composer of Indian descent; Anthony Cheung, an American pianist-composer of Chinese descent ("whose music sounds French," Koh says);

Andrew Norman, of Central California, who was also raised by nonmusician parents; and Jörg Widmann, a German who, unlike the others, hails from a family of musicians.

"It's about dialogue between those within and outside the classical world—how is it that we were attracted to this art form and how is it that that has become the definition of who we are even more than race, nationality, more than everything. It's not that I'm Asian-American, that I was raised in a certain religion, or am nonreligious. That definition of being an artist really defines everything."

It may seem that Koh has a lot of plates to spin, but it's in this environment that she feels most at home. "When I'm learning a new piece, I'm not only going to start always from bar one in the first movement," Koh says.

"I'm going to work on the first movement for a period of time, and then move to the second movement, or even a different piece—it's better for fluidity and concentration. For me, everything about music is almost a metaphor for how I live my life."

And dinner can wait. ■

WHAT JENNIFER KOH PLAYED

Though she declines to speak of her current instrument for fear of being robbed, Jennifer Koh had been playing the 1727 "Ex-Grumiaux Ex-General DuPont Stradivari" from 1997 to 2009, which had been on loan from Patricia M. Kozerefski and Richard Bogomolny, according to Cozio.com.

"It definitely has changed me as a player," Koh told *Strings* in a 2007 feature. "With a great instrument, just like in a relationship, you can't just impose yourself on it."

"The more you get to know the instrument and its different timbres and colors, you become very connected to it. Now it's an extension of myself, and it's become hard to imagine myself playing on anything else."