

SONG FOR THEIR FATHERS

Violinist Jennifer Koh and composer Vijay Iyer conjure a new way to explore the nature of grief

By Greg Cahill



Koh and Iyer performing live

PHOTO: SIMON LUETHI

"My father was part of a family history shaped by war, displacement, immigration, and the enormous act of building a new life," says violinist and educator Jennifer Koh. "Both of my parents came out of the experience of Korea and the Korean War, and that history has always been part of who I am. My parents wanted me to have opportunities that they themselves had not had. So much of the life I've been able to build as an artist is connected to the sacrifices they made and the possibilities they created for me. When someone dies, you also begin to understand that their legacy isn't only contained in the things they said or did. It exists in me and in the choices I make every day.

"For me, honoring my father is partly about acknowledging that inheritance. Memory changes as we change. Music and art give me a place to honor that complexity and to continue having a relationship with someone who is no longer physically here."

To that end, Koh is collaborating with composer Vijay Iyer on *Scenes of Living and Dying*. Iyer is a celebrated pianist, composer, producer, bandleader, and Harvard University music professor with roots in both the avant-classical and jazz worlds. The *New York Times* has called him a "social conscience, multimedia collaborator, system builder, rhapsodist, historical thinker, and multicultural gateway."

Three years in the making, *Scenes of Living and Dying*—for violin, piano, and multimedia—explores loss, healing, celebration, and transformation through, what Koh calls, a series of musical "scenes, ceremonies, and conjurings." The first installment premiered in 2024 as part of Koh's "Sounds of US" project. In October 2026, Koh and Iyer are scheduled at press time to open the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society's season with the world premiere of Part II.

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–Jennifer Koh

"Vijay and I both lost our fathers around the same time, so there was a shared experience of grief between us, even though of course grief is deeply personal and everyone's relationship with a parent is different," Koh says. "Music is the genesis of everything for me. I feel that it holds truth and is about the search to find and reveal the truth. It is a way of entering experiences that are difficult to articulate in words. Grief is personal, but it is also completely universal."

Koh's father, Choong-Ho John Koh, was an immigrant who settled in the Chicago area and worked in the cleaning industry. He died in 2023 after a battle with cancer. Iyer's father, Dr. Y. "Raghu" Raghunathan, emigrated from India to the United States in 1963 and built a career in pharmacology and science. He died in 2021 following a spinal injury. Iyer also has composed the elegiac "For My Father," released on pianist Sarah Rothenberg's 2026 album *In Darkness and Light* (Dacamera).

"We will all lose people we love," Koh says. "So, for me, the goal was never simply to make a memorial or to tell my father's story literally. It was to create a space where something very private could open into something larger. Where people could bring their own memories, their own losses, and their own experiences of love. That is one of the things I find so powerful about music: It doesn't tell you exactly what to feel. It can hold contradictory emotions at the same time, like sadness and gratitude, absence and an incredible sense of presence. I think *Scenes of Living and Dying* makes room for all of those things."

While this work has grown into a public expression of her grief, the emotions that inform it began in a personal place. "I think the work is increasingly opening outward," Koh says. "A personal experience of loss inevitably leads to larger questions. How do we remember and celebrate loved ones? How does memory change over time? How does private grief connect to the grief we experience collectively? What does it mean to witness someone else's loss? Musically and dramatically, the work is continuing to find its form. I actually love that it's evolving over time. There's something very honest about allowing the work to remain open while we're still discovering what it needs to become."


SCOTT SUCHMAN FORTAS


EBRU YILDIZ

◀ **Jennifer Koh, top, and Vijay Iyer**

This isn't the first time Koh and Iyer have collaborated. Koh first encountered Iyer's music more than a decade ago when she was serving on a grant-making panel to which he had applied. "I was immediately struck by his imagination and his musical voice," she says. But because she had encountered Iyer's work through the grant process, and to avoid a conflict of interest, she waited until an appropriate amount of time had passed before contacting him.

The first work she commissioned was for her Bridge to Beethoven project—Iyer wrote "Bridgetower Fantasy" to be paired with Beethoven's "Kreutzer" Sonata. Bridge to Beethoven premiered in 2015 at UC Santa Barbara. It was a multi-program project that paired Ludwig van Beethoven's ten violin and piano sonatas with new works by a diverse group of modern composers, including Iyer, Andrew Norman, Anthony Cheung, Jorg Widmann, Daniel Bernard Roumain, and Deanna Rusnock, among others.

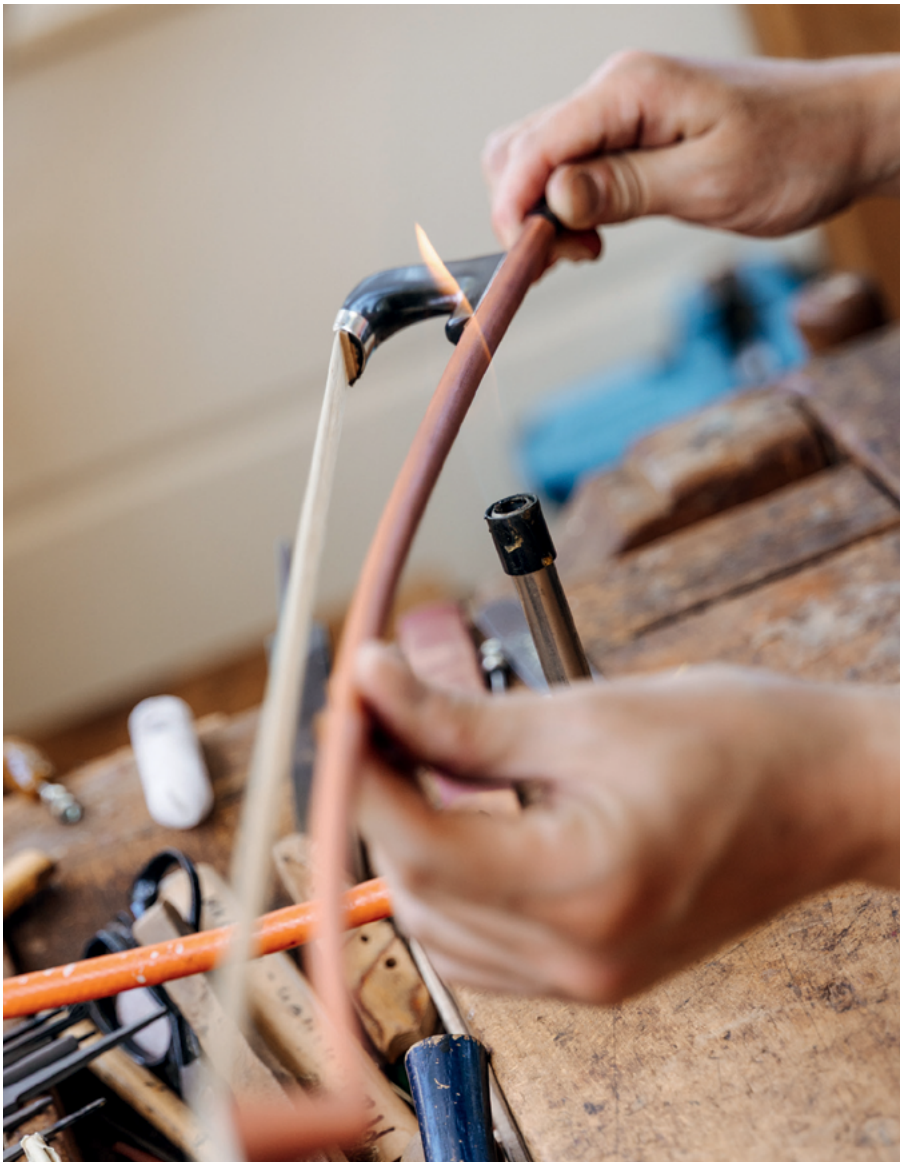
"I was so impressed with the work that I immediately asked him to write more for me," she says of Iyer.

Though they are collaborating on an elegy, Koh notes, and even though she and Iyer went through similar losses within their families, their experiences are not the same. "Grief is individual," she says. "What we can share is a willingness to listen to one another and to allow those experiences to become part of the creative process without having to explain or define everything."

In that vein, their collaborations often begin with a vocal conversation, she adds, but once Iyer writes the music and she begins playing it, an entirely different kind of conversation starts—one that moves through artistic process. "I respond to the music physically and emotionally through playing and that becomes part of how the work develops," she explains. "After working together for so many years, there is a level of trust that allows us to communicate in ways that aren't always verbal."

Known for her deep commitment to contemporary classical music, Koh has worked with many living composers over the years. But she and Iyer clearly have formed a close creative bond. Recently, he composed the intriguing six-part suite, *Trouble*, released in August on Koh's album *The American Concerto, Vol. 1* (Cedille), featuring Timothy Weiss and the Oberlin Contemporary Music Ensemble. Listening to this moving work, there's no question that Koh and Iyer are a good match—together, they have created highly evocative and strikingly beautiful music. That is evidenced by the subtle musings of Koh's violin as heard on "Trouble: I & II," which showcases Koh's dynamic range and her ability to coax whisper-soft melodies from the quietest of high-register passages—or to blaze with incendiary fury.

"I think we are both very curious and eager to learn new things and look, listen, and create new work," Koh says of her collaborations with Iyer. "We both believe in evolving as human beings and artists. My own work moves between traditional repertoire and music being created now. What interests me is the conversation that becomes possible between those worlds. In our collaboration, the most important thing we have is artistic



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belief in one another and trust. We both challenge each other. Sometimes I might question something he's written, and he knows that I'm doing it in service of the work. And he can ask me to try something unfamiliar, and I trust him enough to go there."

In addition to Bridge to Beethoven, *The American Concerto, Vol. 1*, and *Scenes of Living and Dying*, Koh and Iyer collaborated throughout 2018–19 on *Limitless*, a recording and touring project that explored the relationship between composer and instrumentalist. Much of the music was eclectic, introspective, and often atmospheric, blurring the boundaries between avant-garde classical, jazz, electronica, and art music. Other participating composers included Qasim Naqvi, Lisa Bielawa, Du Yun, Tyshawn Sorey, Nina C. Young, Wang Lu, and Missy Mazzoli. Iyer contributed a four-part suite titled *The Diamond*.

Asked what she has learned about herself—and Iyer—over the years, Koh responds, "Art has always been about seeking and telling truth. To reach this place, I believe I have to reach a space of vulnerability. I have always heard this in Vijay's music, his willingness to venture into such a space. Vijay has continually invited me into musical spaces that were not a part of traditional classical violin training—improvisation, different rhythmic languages, and different ideas about the relationship between a soloist and an ensemble. I've also learned how important trust is in taking artistic risks. I know that Vijay may ask something of me that takes me outside of what is familiar, and I'm willing to enter that space because I trust the intention behind it."

Indeed, sometimes Iyer's compositions require unorthodox techniques that challenge the violinist. In 2015, Koh told *Strings* writer Jeff Kallis that she finds it fascinating that Iyer is "essentially stretching what the violin can do. With Vijay's piece, he uses sounds he calls 'subharmonics' . . . and the way I'm able to get to those is to do everything basically the opposite from what you're supposed to do to get a 'nice' sound: My bow is at an angle, I'm using a very, very, very slow bow, and I'm playing over the fingerboard . . ."



JUERGEN FRANK

WHAT JENNIFER KOH PLAYS

For many years, Koh played a golden-period 1727 Stradivari known as the "General DuPont, ex Grumiaux," which had been played by the renowned Belgian violinist Arthur Grumiaux. It was on loan from a private patron. After the 2014 sale of that instrument to a collector in China, Koh began using custom-made contemporary instruments, notably violins made by the luthier Stefan-Peter Greiner of Zurich, Switzerland, and the Brooklyn-based violin maker Samuel Zygmuntowicz. She uses a François Tourte bow.

She now says, "Over time, you learn how another person listens. I think that's one of the things I value most about Vijay as a collaborator. He listens very deeply—to people, to performers, to history, and to what is happening in the room. You don't necessarily have to explain everything for it to become part of the work."

This long-term working relationship also has a cumulative effect that manifests on each new piece, she adds, introducing new ideas and helping the participants to grow artistically and emotionally. There is an arc to this growing body of work, Koh notes. "After more than a decade, Vijay understands a lot of how I think about music, my sound and physical approach to the violin, and the kinds of risks I'm willing to take," she says. "I've developed a much deeper understanding of his musical language, like his relationship to rhythm, improvisation, structure, history, and collective music-making. That means each new project can begin further along. You're able to take greater risks because there's already a foundation of trust.

"One of the things I love about long-term artistic relationships is that they grow with you. We aren't the same artists or the same people we were when we first worked together. So the conversation changes, the questions change, and the work changes with us . . . I don't think of these works as isolated commissions anymore. They feel like chapters in a continuing conversation. 'Bridgetower Fantasy' began a conversation about history and erasure. *Trouble* expanded that into questions about racial violence, the immigrant experience, vulnerability, and the relationship between an individual and a community. *The Diamond* brought us into an even more fluid relationship between composition and improvisation. Vijay also contributed 'For Violin Alone' to my *Alone Together* project during the pandemic. And now *Scenes of Living and Dying* brings that history of trust into something extraordinarily personal.

"When you've worked with someone over this length of time, each new piece contains some memory of the pieces that came before it. You're not repeating yourself, but you're continuing a conversation. The collaboration becomes its own kind of living history." ■