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Jennifer Koh, Hertz Hall, Berkeley, US — review

The violinist's juxtaposition of Bach with the works he influenced made for a spellbinding recital

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Jennifer Koh

With her natural charm, superior powers of communication and technical brilliance, Jennifer Koh might have contented herself with a career of rapturously received recital and orchestral dates. But the Chicago-born violinist is a seeker, an adventurer, an artist who endeavours to find and reveal relationships, and to see the western musical heritage in an evolving, unbroken continuum. Thus, her *Bach and Beyond*, a project that has juxtaposed Johann Sebastian's solo sonatas and partitas with contemporary creations that owe their existence to the baroque master.

The third instalment of Bach and Beyond brought Koh back to Berkeley, where she made her debut three years ago as the eponymous fiddler of Philip Glass's Einstein on the Beach. Her spellbinding two-hour recital on Sunday offered two Bach sonatas, Berio's Sequenza VIII and a Cal Performances co-commission, John Harbison's For Violin Alone. In this particular survey, Koh traced the contemporary responses to Bach's fugal writing, in particular, the fugues of the A minor and C major Sonatas. Curiously, Koh saved the latter for the end of the programme.

She delivered a majestic performance, building intensity with every attack. Koh possesses a fiendish bowing arm and even at a modest dynamic, the ripe tone never loses support. The opening Adagio sustained its solemn mood, while the Largo yielded a serene, well ornamented profusion of melody Koh probed the dancing essence of the final Allegro. It was that dancing impulse which inspired Harbison's work, here receiving its west coast premiere. Violinists everywhere should get to know this sprightly, informed opus, cast in seven, brief characterful movements. The work is deeply violinistic, yet it conjures drama from the opening ground and the delectable echo effects of the first dance.

The solo violin Sequenza yields a rugged Chaconne, alternating two notes almost obsessively. Koh slid into passages, leapt octaves to a note, backed off and relished every eccentricity. Still the songful impulse that never deserts Berio shadows every double stop. A grandly scaled, even luxuriant reading of the A Minor Sonata opened the afternoon.

Four out of Five Stars

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