

LIMELIGHT

Music, Arts & Culture

Feature

Changing Tune

Jennifer Koh on racism and investing in the music of tomorrow.

by Jessie Tu on 20 February, 2023

American violinist Jennifer Koh has dedicated herself to expanding the contemporary violin repertoire and making classical music more inclusive. She tells Jessie Tu why she commissions so many new works, and discusses her musical relationship with Missy Mazzoli, whose violin concerto *Procession*, she will perform at the Adelaide Festival.



Jennifer Koh. Photo © Juergen Frank

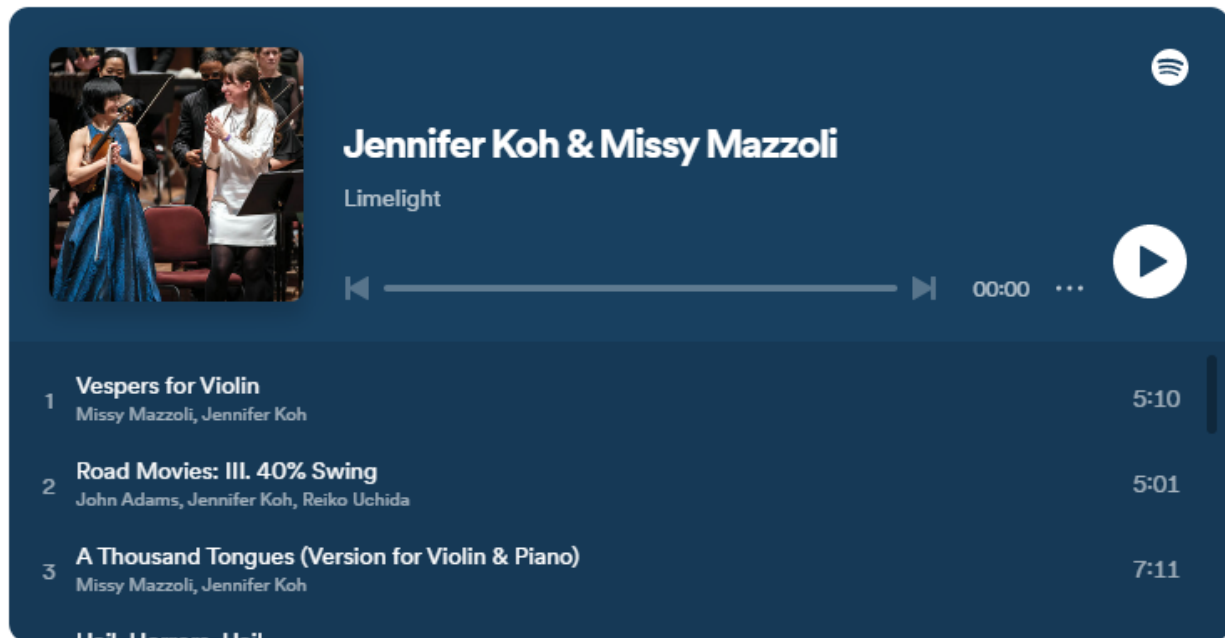
If you were to ask [Jennifer Koh](#) to describe her most acute memory from the height of the pandemic, she'd probably tell you it was the sound of multiple sirens blasting through New York City, where she lives.

"Twenty-four hours a day, never stopping for days and days and days. That was my aural experience," she says.

The American violinist doesn't like remembering New York during this time, describing it as "so terrifying, horrifying and tragic".

At home during lockdown, she watched ambulances speed back and forth along the streets as her usually busy schedule of global concerts gradually dwindled and was then cancelled.

Never one to sit around waiting for things to come to her, the celebrated violinist busied herself commissioning new pieces from both emerging and established composers. Within weeks of the first lockdowns, she was performing them on Instagram, and embarking on other commissions.



One of these was by her long-time friend and collaborator, [Missy Mazzoli](#), who spent part of the pandemic working on a violin concerto for Koh called *Procession*.

In March, Koh will perform the Australian premiere of *Procession* with the [Adelaide Symphony Orchestra](#) at the [Adelaide Festival](#), a year after she gave its world premiere in Washington DC with the National Symphony Orchestra, which commissioned the work together with the Cincinnati Symphony and BBC Symphony Orchestras.

Koh is known for her work in expanding the contemporary violin repertoire, and has premiered more than 100 works written for her. These commissioned projects often explore the form of the violin and its potential for artistic engagement with contemporary societal concerns through collaborations with diverse composers. Just reading the list of works she has commissioned is a dizzying exercise.

Born in Chicago to Korean parents, Koh made her debut with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra at age 11, and hasn't stopped performing since.

She began playing the violin by chance, choosing the instrument in a Suzuki-method program only because spaces for cello and piano had been filled.

In the next few years, she went on to win a top prize at Moscow's International Tchaikovsky Competition and the Concert Artists Guild Competition, guided by her mentors and teachers at the Curtis Institute, which included Jaime Laredo and Felix Galimir.

A lifetime spent around creative artists has meant that Koh has a wide spectrum of friends from many different disciplines.

"I'm close friends with people that are historians and authors and poets and, of course, musicians," she says. "They just make life better. I feel like that has enriched my life, and I've learned so much from them. I feel very connected with a lot of people I don't necessarily collaborate with."

Though collaborate she does. In fact, at the core of Koh's artistic pursuit is her drive to change the environment of classical music – particularly for people of colour.

In 2014, she founded the artist-driven, not-for-profit ARCO Collaborative, which advocates for inclusivity in classical music and develops new musical works by artists of colour and women composers, allowing them to share stories previously unheard in the West.

Last year, she had the arts community across America talking about her collaboration with African American bass-baritone [Davóne Tines](#), *Everything Rises*, more of which later.

The importance of her work was recognised through several awards in 2022.

In April, she won a Grammy for her album *Alone Together*, featuring world premiere recordings of 39 works commissioned during lockdown. In May, she received an honorary doctorate from the Cleveland Institute of Music for her excellence as a performer, her work growing the contemporary violin repertoire, and her commitment to diversity in classical music.

From Bach to Mazzoli

Koh and Mazzoli have known each other for more than a decade, and have frequently collaborated on a range of musical projects.

"One of the reasons our relationship works so well is that both of us always want the best thing for the art itself," Koh tells me over Zoom. "We're able to remove our egos from the situation. We both know that we're on each other's side, which is the most important thing."

Koh clearly remembers the first time she met Mazzoli in New York City, 10 years ago. They shared Chinese food, then visited Koh's favourite cupcake café.



Jennifer Koh with composer Missy Mazzoli at the premiere of *Procession*, performed by the National Symphony Orchestra, 2022. Photo © Scott Suchman

After the meeting, Koh asked Mazzoli to write a piece that could follow the Bach *Chaconne*. The result, *Dissolve, O My Heart*, was the first piece Mazzoli composed for Koh, who will perform it at the UKARIA Cultural Centre in a recital for the Adelaide Festival.

“Working with somebody over a long period of time ... you get to see how they’ve grown, developed and evolved. It’s a beautiful thing to be able to witness that, and then also to be able to be a part of that,” says Koh.

The recital will also include Mazzoli’s *Kinski Paganini* and two of Bach’s Violin Sonatas. For as long as she can remember, Bach has been Koh’s centre of gravity – her spiritual home.

“I think inevitably I always return to Bach,” she says “[His music has] been with me almost all my life.”

Dissolve, O My Heart, which Koh describes as “melodic” and “haunting”, uses the D minor opening chord of Bach’s *Chaconne* as a launching-off point to explore the possibilities of human empathy.

Koh is excited about premiering both *Dissolve, O My Heart* and *Procession* in Adelaide, the latter under the baton of Finnish conductor Emilia Hoving. The concerto has undergone a variety of transitions since its first public performance in 2021.

“It really does feel like she wrote this concerto for me, because knowing who I am as a person and also as a player, she was able to put all of these different elements into it,” says Koh.

“She trusted me a lot, because I’ve played in quite a few countries in my lifetime with different orchestras and different conductors, so there are certain things that one learns [about] what works and what doesn’t.”

During the lonely months of the pandemic, Mazzoli read about the history of medieval healing rituals, learning about the solemn spiral processions of Black Death penitents, musical healing rituals, and the St Vitus acolytes and their maniacal attempts to dance their way to better health. This became the inspiration for *Procession* – an unsettling work that showcases the distinguishing characteristics of Mazzoli’s music, known for its sharp, symphonic contrasts and exploratory instrumental textures.

Positioning the violin solo as a figurative healer, sorcerer and soothsayer, the piece will see Koh negotiate abrasive double stops, demonically thrilling runs, rapturous melodies and hypnotic interludes.

Each of *Procession*’s five movements is based on a medieval spell or charm. The first, *Procession in a Spiral*, pays homage to medieval penitential processions; the second, *St Vitus*, references the patron saint of dancing; the third, *O My Soul*, reimagines the hymn of the same name; the fourth, *Bone to Bone, Blood to Blood*, revolves around the second Merseburg Charm, a 9th-century spell that was believed to heal broken limbs; and the fifth, *Procession Ascending*, is a vertical sweep into the sky by the soloist, guiding the orchestra to the concerto’s blissful conclusion.

“Her writing and her music is incredibly emotionally complex,” Koh says. “It’s not simply like, ‘Oh, this is a sad part, this is a happy part’. It’s more complicated than that.”

“We’re human beings and we’re complicated. On certain nights, I’ll play it and bring out a certain side of things ... you feel more connected to one thing or another. Every night is different. I really enjoy playing it.”

Alone Together

Mazzoli is one of the composers featured on Koh’s album, *Alone Together*. She has described her piece, *Hail, Horrors, Hail*, as an unapologetic encapsulation of how she felt at the beginning of the pandemic.

“[*Alone Together* is] a snapshot not just of the pandemic, but of the musical community right now ... all the creativity happening,” Mazzoli told NPR last August. “So, it’s not all darkness and gloom and doom and horrors, you know, there’s something really beautiful about everyone coming together in this one way. And Jenny is just a genius at making those projects happen.”

Koh commissioned 39 emerging and established composers and performed their works as part of her online series. She then recorded them on *Alone Together*, which was awarded the 2022 Grammy for Best Classical Instrumental Solo.

Most of the pieces are less than three minutes long, with evocative titles such as *You Are Still Here* (by Sarah Gibson), *Quiet City* (by inti figgis-vizueta), *exhalation* (by Hanna Benn) and ... *your heart dreams of spring* (by Australian composer [Elizabeth Younan](#)).

The established composers, such as Mazzoli, [Tania León](#) and George Lewis, chose to donate their works, while the emerging composers that they recommended received a micro-commission from Koh's ARCO Collaborative.

Koh wanted to draw attention to the extraordinary financial hardship the pandemic had placed on many in the arts community.

"The whole reason I did it was not only because being a freelancer is so difficult, especially coming out of school or right after school. It's hard enough trying to get into 'the professional world', and then when you [add] a pandemic, which just stopped everything, I really was afraid that we would lose the next generation, if that makes sense."

"So that's why I put it together, as quickly as possible. But in terms of the Grammy, what I am most proud of is the majority of the composers that ended up being commissioned are people of colour, women or non-binary."

Usually, Koh would spend years of prep time discussing a project with a new collaborative artist, but for *Alone Together*, she didn't have such luxury.

"I knew we didn't have time, right?" she says. "We were in an emergency situation. I went to my colleagues that I knew had salaried positions or institutional support, like grants, and I asked them to recommend somebody they knew who was freelance that they really believed in. So [the freelancers] kind of became like the mentee to some degree. Everything was done through recommendation."

Despite the time pressure, Koh worked closely with each composer over Zoom. "In some circumstances, I was spending maybe five hours per week on one piece of work, going back and forth and working and collaborating with a composer," she explains.

Koh is very careful and intentional in whom she works with. She does a lot of research and makes a concerted effort to pick women and non-binary composers, as well as composers of colour.

"Oftentimes they're not coming through the more traditional routes and are not necessarily given the same opportunities or performance spaces as others might," she says.

"I've found that it usually takes a bit more effort to find these artists, and not necessarily going through the most traditional places."

Combating racism



Jennifer Koh and Davóne Tines perform the world premiere of *Everything Rises* for UCSB Arts & Lectures, 2022. Photo © David Bazemore

In many ways, Koh's artistic vision is driven by the recognition of her country's complex racial history – as a Korean–American, she is only too aware of how identities outside the mainstream can be marginalised, mistreated and misunderstood.

The pain, suffering and legacy of racism is something she has used as inspiration in her music, such as her collaboration last year with bass-baritone, musician and dancer, Davóne Tines, in their performance of *Everything Rises*.

The highly original work tells the story of Koh's mother Gertrude Soonja Lee Koh, a refugee from North Korea, and Tines' grandmother Alma Lee Gibbs Tines, who has vivid memories of discrimination and violence dating back decades.

Tines and Koh developed *Everything Rises* to explore what it means to be a person of colour working in classical music. It examines their personal and unique understanding of identity, reimagining songs like Abel Meeropol's *Strange Fruit* – a song about lynching popularised by Billie Holiday – with Koh exploring discordant new sounds on the violin.

Developed by an all-BIPOC creative team, including composer Ken Ueno, the musical work blends genres to achieve the spirit of solidarity that musicians aim for when they're collaborating, recognising their individual artistic centres while celebrating the united fight for justice.

It's a fight that Koh places at the centre of all her creative pursuits.

"I think that our job as artists is to know that we're members of a community, or an urban area, and knowing that is what makes art interesting," she says.

"What I enjoy is hearing the stories of others that are not like me; I know my own experiences."

"I think it's tragic not to have the opportunity to hear the stories and voices of people not like us, because it's our loss. Our lives would be richer if those voices and stories were heard. So, in the end, I think it is the artistic community's responsibility, isn't it? It's just like a human responsibility."

What kind of legacy does she want to leave as someone who casts a vast influence over the American arts community?

"I think it's important to have a mission in one's life that's beyond just yourself," she replies.

"That's what makes life more fulfilling. It's really asking, to some degree, what can we do for our artistic community? What can we do for our larger community? What are we actually leaving behind?"

"Have we actually done anything for other people? It was said much better by Martin Luther King when he posed the question, 'What are you doing for others?' I think that's the most important question that we should all ask ourselves. Of course, for me, I practise and dedicate all this time to becoming a better musician. But a lot of it is about what you are doing for others. What do you ultimately leave behind?"

A profound question we should all ask ourselves from time to time.

Jennifer Koh plays Missy Mazzoli's violin concerto *Procession* with the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra as part of the concert [Fantastical Journeys](#) at Adelaide Town Hall on 18 March. She also performs [in recital](#) at UKARIA Cultural Centre on 19 March. Both concerts are part of [Adelaide Festival](#).