

# A Fast Start, But No Race To the Future

By STEVE SMITH

**I**N a video posted on YouTube last summer the gifted violinist Jennifer Koh can be seen offering a poised, passionate account of the first movement from Paganini's Violin Concerto No. 1 with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. The excellence of Ms. Koh's playing will surprise no one who knows the quality and integrity of her work. What is unusual is that Ms. Koh, who will play Lutoslawski's bracing "Chain 2" with the New York Philharmonic beginning Thursday, offered such a splashy showpiece in her Chicago Symphony debut.

Give her a break: she was 11. The performance was filmed in 1988, when Ms. Koh, preternaturally dignified in her girlish white dress and ribbon belt, was a finalist in the orchestra's young soloists competition. She returned to win in 1992, and in 1994 she claimed a silver medal in the International Tchaikovsky Competition, sharing that accolade with another violinist, Anastasia Chebotareva, in a year when no first prize was awarded. (Clips from that performance are on YouTube too.)

A possible future of further competitions, lucrative contracts and high-profile engagements beckoned. "Even at that age I knew that was not something I wanted," Ms. Koh, now 36, said during a leisurely interview recently in the airy Washington Heights apartment she shares with her husband, the pianist Benjamin Hochman. "After the Tchaikovsky competition it

was only Romantic war horses, and that was a route that I knew I didn't want," she said. "I also knew that I didn't want a full-throttle career right away. When I look back at it, I think it was a really scary decision to make. But at the time it just felt natural, and it felt like something I needed to do."

Ms. Koh has not disowned her precocious past; after all, she posted that Paganini video. But in bypassing the prodigy's steep, slippery ascent in favor of a bookish life as an English literature major at Oberlin College, Ms. Koh took her first step on a quieter path, one in which renown came gradually, accrued through potent performances and unusually thoughtful recitals and recordings.

In what could seem like a bifurcated career Ms. Koh emerged as a lucid advocate

for contemporary works by composers like Kaija Saariaho, Esa-Pekka Salonen and John Zorn in New York, Los Angeles and Chicago, while offering penetrating accounts of canonical concertos elsewhere.

Bach has become a fixture lately, in epic concerts of the unaccompanied sonatas and partitas, and in *Bach and Beyond*, a recital series in which Ms. Koh surrounds those works with other solo pieces and new commissions. Last year she took on the instrumental title role in Philip Glass and Robert Wilson's opera "Einstein on the Beach" in performances including a celebrated run at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

This week Ms. Koh's long road brings her back to the Philharmonic, with which she previously played in parks concerts and at the Bravo! Vail Valley Music Festi-

val in Colorado. With Lorin Maazel, the orchestra's former music director, she will make her subscription-series debut in "Chain 2," a striking late work that bridges Lutoslawski's chance-infused style with more direct modes of bravura.

The engagement is a token recognition of the Lutoslawski centenary this year. But for Ms. Koh the assignment is rife with personal bonds: to Mr. Salonen and Ms. Saariaho, who had their own connections to Lutoslawski; and to Mr. Maazel, at whose Castleton Festival in Virginia Ms. Koh has become a familiar face.

Such links have been paramount in Ms. Koh's journey, which began as the only child of Korean parents in Glen Ellyn, Ill. Her mother, now a professor, fled North

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Renown has come gradually to Jennifer Koh, 36, accrued through potent performances and unusually thoughtful recitals and recordings, despite making her Chicago Symphony debut at age 11.

# Fast Start, but Not a Race

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Korea with her family during the Korean War. “They wanted me to have everything that they didn’t have,” Ms. Koh said. “So they started me in everything: ballet, swimming, diving, gymnastics, rhythmic gymnastics, ice-skating.”

Avid subscribers to the Chicago Symphony and the Lyric Opera of Chicago, Ms. Koh’s parents urged her to take up an instrument at a Suzuki-method school in Wheaton, Ill. Her teacher, Jo Davis, with whom she is still in touch, recognized her precocious talent and helped her find new teachers when her early training had run its course.

Prodigious activities beckoned. Playing with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra at 14, Ms. Koh was noticed by Isaac Stern, who insisted that she study with Jaime Laredo at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. Ms. Koh complied, but only after she had graduated from Oberlin and worked with Felix Galimir at the Marlboro Music School and Festival in Vermont. Galimir’s personal recollections of Ravel, Schoenberg and Webern helped to inspire Ms. Koh’s passion for collaborating with living composers.

“By the time she came to Curtis, she was pretty mature,” Mr. Laredo said in a telephone interview from Miami. “She had her own voice. She had her own personality. She definitely had something to say that was very special.” The challenge, he added, was in guiding Ms. Koh without stifling her creative freedom.

“There were times when she would do things that I would totally disagree with, completely,” he said. “But I just thought: ‘That’s her. Let her do it her way.’”

Now Ms. Koh is demonstrating her gratitude to Mr. Laredo in another new project: *Two x Four*, in which the two play double concertos by Bach and Mr. Glass, and commissioned pieces by Anna Clyne and David Ludwig. Ms. Koh handled the legwork for the initiative, arranging concert presenters and securing financing. When she and Mr. Laredo played Bach’s *Concerto for Two Violins* and Ms. Clyne’s ravishing “*Prince of Clouds*” with the Chicago Symphony in December, the union of their disparate sounds enhanced the emotional potency



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Jennifer Koh in Nashville last week. She will play Lutoslawski’s “*Chain 2*” with the New York Philharmonic starting Thursday.

of the performances.

Both of Ms. Koh’s current projects are due soon in the New York performance spaces with which she is most closely linked. She will play the second installment of *Bach and Beyond* on March 2 and 3 at the 92nd Street Y, then present *Two x Four* with the Curtis Chamber Orchestra on March 13 at the Miller Theater.

Fresh connections loom, including a new concerto by Andrew Norman for the 2014-15 season and a Beethoven-centered project just starting to percolate. But opportunities continue to arise through the personal bonds Ms. Koh has formed. A second project with Ms. Clyne is on the drawing board, and with a run of “*Einstein on the Beach*” coming

up in October at the Los Angeles Opera, Ms. Koh and Mr. Wilson will collaborate in a staged version of Bach’s sonatas and partitas in Paris next fall.

It is to such relationships that Ms. Koh attributes her success.

“Even by the time I got to Curtis, after the Tchaikovsky competition and all of that, I still didn’t know that I could make a career in music,” she said. “I just feel lucky enough to have met so many people — like Jaime and like Felix, and even my first violin teacher back in Wheaton, Ill. — that really helped me along the way. I know that I would not be in this place if it weren’t for so many people. At least for me it takes a village.”

## New York Philharmonic

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Jennifer Koh

### LORIN MAAZEL Conductor JENNIFER KOH Violin

Thu, Jan 24 7:30pm\*  
Fri, Jan 25 8:00pm  
Sat, Jan 26 8:00pm

**TCHAIKOVSKY** *Romeo and Juliet*, Overture-Fantasy  
**LUTOSŁAWSKI** *Chain 2*:  
*Dialogue for Violin and Orchestra*