



THE Q+A

Jennifer Koh

Whether on a recital stage or a fashion runway, the intrepid violinist thinks in broad strokes.

BY
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WHEN JENNIFER KOH (Violin '02) accepted an offer last fall to become artistic director of the Kennedy Center's Fortas Chamber Music Concerts, she viewed it as a chance to work on a broader canvas. The Korean-American violinist has made expansive projects her calling card, most recently with *Everything Rises*, a 70-minute multimedia piece in which she and bass-baritone Davóne Tines explored their respective relationships to classical music's historically white culture.

Last year, Ms. Koh won a GRAMMY Award for *Alone Together*, an album of 39 newly commissioned works for solo violin that grew out of a lockdown-era streaming series of the same name. And she is currently touring with Missy Mazzoli's Violin Concerto, a work that casts the soloist as "a soothsayer, sorcerer, healer, and pied piper-type character."

No stranger to managerial roles, Ms. Koh runs the ARCO Collaborative, a nonprofit that commissions new works, especially by women and artists of color. The ruby-haired Illinois native, who in February performed at a Marc Jacobs fashion show, talks with *Overtones* about her expanding role as a concert programmer.



You started as artistic director at the Kennedy Center in December. How did this come about and what excites you most about it?

At the time, the search process was quiet, and I had no idea who else was in the mix. They let me know a couple of months before the official announcement, which was in December. The idea of this was the furthest thing from my mind but what I'm most excited about is having an opportunity to advocate for others. The Kennedy Center is the only nationally funded cultural center in the United States, and it can serve as a kind of creative incubator. I'm most looking forward to giving platforms to other artists, but also advocating for the series to really look like what America looks like.

Do you see this as an opportunity to get classical music in front of politicians and Washington power brokers?

One thing that I do know is that one does not talk about political positions at the Kennedy Center. The board of trustees is presidentially appointed. Their tenure is six years, so the people in charge right now were chosen by the previous president.* Here's the thing: I already know what's going on in my head. But it has always been interesting to me to know and learn the stories of others who are not like me and whose stories have not been heard.

Your first fully programmed season will be in 2024–25. How will classical music fit in?

Even when I was young everybody was saying that classical music is dying, or it's almost dead. So how do we serve this art form in the future? I think it's really by making it relevant. If we just keep these composers on pedestals of the past, then it's only about history. And it's not necessarily relevant to present-day life. Every project that I've done has been a way to create a different lens into the



past and into the repertoire. *Bach and Beyond* was about exploring Bach's influence on compositions for solo violin throughout the centuries. *Bridge to Beethoven* was about how different composers engaged with Beethoven sonatas in different ways. So, I think the Kennedy Center [series] will be an extension of that kind of musical curiosity.

Some concert presenters have come through the upheavals of the past three years with a great-

er willingness to shake up their programming. But there also seems to be a concern that audiences are not returning to their pre-pandemic numbers. How do you see this playing out?

When I've witnessed a space for artists to make their own things, I have not observed a drop-off in audiences. When I played with The Philadelphia Orchestra in Missy Mazzoli's concerto, every night was sold out. When I've done *Alone Together* programs or any kind of new music,

Above: Jennifer Koh performs Bernstein's *Serenade* with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and music director Andris Nelsons.

Right: Jennifer Koh performs *Everything Rises* with Davóné Tines at BAM.

ARAM BOGHOSIAN

*President Biden appointed six trustees to the 36-member board in October 2022. Former President Trump made multiple rounds of appointments, including four in December 2020.



project now, three years later?

This was a way to band together to help the next generation of musicians. But when I look back at the music now, it's like an archive of that period. When I have played those programs, or when people have heard that album, they come up to me and say, 'Oh, wow, I've been trying to block out that period of time, but this really brought me back to remembering how I felt.'

For the Kennedy Center's 2023–24 season, you'll be presenting a reboot of *Two x Four*, a project with your former Curtis teacher, Jamie Laredo (Violin '59). What prompted you to revive this?

When *Two x Four* debuted, it was about the passing down of tradition and the evolution of music-making from one generation to the next. So, using the Bach Double Concerto as a starting point, we commissioned Anna Cline, David Ludwig (Composition '01), and a work by Philip [Glass] called *Icarus*, for two violins and string orchestra. The idea of mentorship felt appropriate, given that I'm inheriting this series from Yossi [the late pianist Joseph Kalichstein], who is of my teacher's generation. I

wanted to honor that because I have received so much from my teachers.

Another one of your early mentors was the late Felix Galimir, a long-time Curtis faculty member who once worked with figures like Ravel and Schoenberg. I understand that he helped to inspire your passion for contemporary music.

Basically, he guided me to go to the Marlboro Festival when I was quite young. But his guidance also really shaped how I thought about music. Felix's life was saved by Branislav Huberman, who is one of my favorite violinists. Aside from being a great musician, he took the time and spent the money to get Jewish musicians out of Europe, including Felix, who was in the Vienna Philharmonic at the time. He saved their lives. Felix changed the landscape of string playing in the United States. So, in that sense, it's important to remember that we are active participants in history, and that every decision can impact the lives of others in very profound ways. I've seen that in my own life through my teachers.

This interview was edited and condensed.

every show is sold out. Of course, I know it's in the dialogue. But my hope coming out of the pandemic is that artists will get the opportunity to dream ourselves out of this time. Because that's our job: to imagine the world we want to live in and then make it. Right?

With *Alone Together*, you commissioned some 40 solo violin works by both established and emerging composers at a time when there was little work to go around. How do you view that

