

MARSHAL
YOUR MARTELÉ

|| GET READY FOR YOUR
RETURN TO THE STAGE

|| 2021 ANNUAL
BUYER'S GUIDE

STUDIO STRINGS

Violinist
**Jennifer
Koh**

commissions
'micro-works'
to make
a big impact

THE HALCYON DAYS
OF STUDIO STRINGS

VIJAY GUPTA
TURNS PERFECTION
ON ITS HEAD

INTENSITY & INNOVATION:
CELEBRATING
ASTOR PIAZZOLLA



TIME CAP SULE

Jennifer Koh's 'Alone Together' project captured the pandemic lockdown experience while amplifying underrepresented musical voices

BY INGE KJEMTRUP

The first weeks of the coronavirus pandemic were the toughest. The uncertainty of how the virus was transmitted. The search for food and necessities as stores were emptied out. The unbelievable news reports of the terrible human toll and the painful recognition that life might be different for a long time.

Music can speak truth to us during a crisis—think of Shostakovich and the siege of Leningrad, or Rostropovich playing at the Berlin Wall in 1989. But with so many performers and composers confined to their homes, separated from each other and from their audiences, how could music play a role?

For violinist Jennifer Koh, the crisis of the pandemic inspired her to create a powerful project, which she called “Alone Together.”

In early March 2020, Koh flew back to New York City after a concert tour. “The following day, every half hour, I was getting a call that another concert had been canceled,” she tells me over Zoom. “Of course I panicked, because that’s my work. That’s more than work, it’s my entire life. Or, at that time I thought it was my entire life.”

When Koh went out to stock up on supplies, the grocery store shelves were empty. “I found one sad can of tomatoes and a couple of apples.

“I woke up the next morning and realized I need to have perspective. My things are not completely canceled; most of them are being postponed. So I’m really lucky and I realized it was much, much worse for my younger freelance colleagues.”

She considered her next steps. “I always need to imagine the end of the piece before I start the piece. I remember thinking, ‘OK, there’s going to be an end to this pandemic.’ So I was imagining the end, and then I thought, well, when I look back, what kind of person do I want to have been? Do I want to look back and think that I actually helped people and made a difference?”

“A lot of my projects—and a lot of what’s important to me—are based on this idea of inclusivity of underrepresented voices and people who haven’t been heard before. Part of that is the realization that we’re all active members of history. I’m very conscious that every action we take really makes a difference reverberating into the future.” She tells me about the violinist Bronislaw Huberman,



JUERGEN FRANK



who during the 1930s helped violinist Felix Galimir relocate to the United States. Galimir was one of her teachers and a strong advocate of her place in the music world.

Koh has enjoyed an impressive and innovative career since her debut with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra at the age of 11. She is well known for making connections between standard repertoire and contemporary music with series like *Bach and Beyond* and *Bridge to Beethoven*. A powerful champion of new voices, she has had more than 100 works composed especially for her.

Less than a week after her return to New York, Koh had the elements of *Alone Together* in place. Remembering her own struggles as a freelancer, she decided that

“
**I’m very conscious
that every action
we take really
makes a difference
reverberating into
the future.**

—Jennifer Koh

”

the priority would be to help as many people as possible. She commissioned 20 composers to write a 30-second “micro-work,” asking each of them, in turn, to recommend a younger composer. Koh and the established composers donated their time, but the younger composers were paid. The only compositional requirement was that each piece would be 30 seconds long.

For ten weeks, starting in April, people tuned in every Friday at 7 PM to see Koh walk into her living room and perform four never-heard-before pieces. She prefaced each performance with a short explanation: “*Alone Together* is an artistic response to the

coronavirus pandemic and the financial hardship it has placed on many in the music community. It is an online commissioning project that brings composers together in support of the many freelancers among them.”

Most the pieces exceed 30 seconds and all reflect the mood of the most difficult days of lockdown. Some of the titles tell a story on their own: “*Together, But Alone (In Quarantine)*” (by Morgan Guerin), “*You Are Still Here*” (Sarah Gibson), or “*Hail, Horrors, Hail*” (Missy Mazzoli).

Philadelphia-based composer David Serkin Ludwig’s contribution was “*All the Rage*,” which ends with the violinist screaming. Koh’s scream seemed quite heartfelt. “It was horrific in March and April [2020] in New York,” recalls Koh. “I remember there were like three days of constant ambulance sirens. There was not even a millisecond of silence.”

Ludwig explains the title: “*All the Rage*’ is modeled after death metal, which is not my first choice of music, but it’s a music that has the feeling of protest and rage that I think described how many of us were feeling at the time.

“For me, writing for solo violin is as challenging as writing for orchestra. You have to think on so many different planes at the same time. There’s the burden of the repertoire as well. But it’s also a tremendous advantage because it’s such an expressive and complete instrument in and of itself. So I’m happy to listen to solo violin all day.” (Fortunately for Ludwig he is married to an excellent violinist, Bella Hristova.)

Patrick Castillo and his wife, a member of the Jasper String Quartet, and their two children were at a festival in Arizona when the news came of increasing cases in Washington state. When they returned home to Philadelphia, concerns about what precautions to take combined with anxieties about childcare, visiting grandparents, and finances.

Castillo’s piece is “*Mina Cecilia’s Constitutional*,” named after his daughter, then just turning one. “I would spend a lot of mornings out in the courtyard with my two kids. My son would be playing in the sandbox and I would have Mina in the baby carrier. And I would be walking back and forth from one end of the corridor to the other literally for hours. There’s this weird cognitive dissonance of



JUERGEN FRANK

being in this idyllic little pod on a beautiful day and the birds singing and walking back and forth and going only up as far as the gate, because we might get COVID and the world outside was so frightening.”

For Sugar Vendil, whose “Simple Tasks 2” was performed in the series, the pandemic has had a lasting effect on her life as a composer and pianist. “I really used this time to think about how I want to work, who I want to work with, what I really care about. You know, especially in New York, it’s like, go, go, go, go. Right? That’s how we learn to live. And I realized I do jobs that I don’t need to do just because it’s all about filling your time, making as much money as possible, and not ever sitting still, because that means you’re a loser.”

Even as Koh returns to the concert stage, she has not left this phase of her life behind. She is performing and recording the *Alone Together* pieces (and commissioning a few more). The recording is scheduled for release in August on Cedille. “I think we always want to forget painful things—that’s maybe a normal human reaction,” she says, “but I also think it’s important to remember things.”

“
**I think we always
want to forget
painful things, but I
also think it’s important
to remember.**

—Jennifer Koh

”
“What Jennifer’s doing with this project is not only cultivating new works for violin, but being an incredible advocate for composers and by extension music itself. She’s committed an enormous amount of time and energy to being an advocate. She’s really a role model for many of us artists about how to build community,” says Ludwig.

Koh has also been turning her attention to the upswing in violence against Asian Americans, which has increased dramatically since

last year nationwide. One powerful action was the making of a short video with bass-baritone Davóne Tines, performing Ken Ueno’s arrangement of “Strange Fruit” for a Carnegie Hall series, “Voices of Hope.”

Now vice president of artistic planning at the New York Philharmonic, Castillo finds hope in recent creative projects, like the Philharmonic’s “Bandwagon” series—which stages performances throughout the city in a mobile, 20-foot shipping container—and partnerships with other cultural institutions. “I’m hopeful that the renewed focus on representation society-wide will move the needle in a more meaningful way than it has for generations. I think there is recognition of not just the responsibility, but the immediate power of what we can do to make a difference.”

As the pandemic eases (at least in some parts of the world) and artists make an incremental return to in-person activities, *Alone Together* is all the more valuable for having captured a profound historical moment in a video time capsule. “I didn’t realize it then, but now looking back, it was really a musical archive of that time,” says Koh. ■