

SMALL STRINGS FROM THE BIG APPLE

A shared 'heartbeat' brought New York violinist Jennifer Koh and composer Missy Mazzoli together in a 'pandemic concerto'

Story **PATRICK McDONALD**

A shared passion for championing the work of emerging female and non-binary composers is just one of the bonds that links New York violinist Jennifer Koh with Missy Mazzoli, whose new concerto she will perform with the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra as part of this year's Festival.

Koh will also play another of Mazzoli's compositions – the haunting *Dissolve, O My Heart* – juxtaposed with sonatas by Bach in a solo recital at the UKARIA Cultural Centre in Mount Barker on the Festival's closing day.

"I just always felt very connected to Missy's music. Also, on a personal level, having known her for so long – we've been working together for over 10 years – it's just meant a lot to be able to see each other evolve as artists," Koh says.

"What's really nice is that I'm playing *Procession*, the violin concerto that she wrote. Performing that piece has been amazing because it really feels like she's written the piece for me. So all of the different sides of who I am, I feel like she really wrote that into the work."

Mazzoli – whose opera *Breaking the Waves* was part of the 2020 Festival and who composed the concerto for contrabass *Dark with Excessive Bright* for the Australian Chamber Orchestra in 2018 – had previously written a number of smaller works for Koh.

"Dissolve, O My Heart was the first piece she wrote for me, and then *Kinski Paganini* (2016) and *Hail, Horrors, Hail* (2020)," Koh says.

The world premiere of *Procession* with the Cincinnati Symphony was part of a

remarkable 2022 for Koh, after a difficult two years as the global Covid-19 pandemic robbed her – and fellow musicians – of the opportunity to perform for live audiences.

A Grammy Award for her classical instrumental solo album *Alone Together* last April was followed by the inaugural *Eroica* Award for Outstanding Service to Music in June, then her appointment as artistic director for the Kennedy Center's Fortas Chamber Music Concerts.

Koh's teacher had been Jamie Laredo, violinist of the Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson Trio, which also featured cellist Sharon Robinson and pianist Joseph "Yossi" Kalichstein – who had programmed the Kennedy Center series for 25 seasons until his death last March.

"I had the opportunity to play with Yossi Kalichstein as well, so I'm quite honoured to be able to take on the series that he led for so long," she says.

Alone Together began as an online performance series by Koh, which the New York Times called "a marvel for a time of crisis", describing its line-up of

“IT FELT VERY NATURAL TO HAVE GONE LOOKING IN THE PAST FOR ANSWERS IN THE PRESENT

39 composers as "more inclusive than anything in mainstream classical music".

"There were several things that were interesting. First of all, the pandemic was so much about our worlds shrinking, because being with people was dangerous," Koh says. "I didn't realise it at the time, but I feel very grateful because that was a time where I was meeting all these new people – albeit on Zoom – and getting to know them through their music. So, in a sense, my world really expanded during that time."

Usually, Koh says commissioning a work would involve many years of research for her, but the pandemic changed all that.

"I remember leaving college and how hard that is, to make your first steps ... that first period of time when you're just entering into a professional world. These were all artists that lost their first opportunity to write for orchestra – or for string quartet or whatever it might have been – and that experience.

"So I understood that there was a great deal of urgency, even financially, for these musicians. I spoke to a lot of my friends and colleagues that are composers, who had either institutional support or tenured or salaried positions, and asked them to recommend freelance artists that they felt connected to, that they believed in. That's how the younger composers were commissioned, and that's how we did it so quickly. We started within weeks of the Shelter in Place Order in New York."

Similarly, Mazzoli had helped start a mentorship program for female and gender nonconforming composers called *Luna Lab*, in collaboration with the Kaufman Music Centre in New York.

Mazzoli's *Dissolve O My Heart*, was part of Koh's 2012 album called *Bach & Beyond Part I*, on which new pieces were written in response to his famous sonatas and partitas.

It starts with the D minor opening chord of Bach's *Chaconne* which, a decade later, also leads into *Procession*.

"The violin emerges from this very strong initial chord in the orchestra and begins this journey leaning into this orchestral sound, but then also leading the orchestra out," Koh says.

"There's kind of a heartbeat that runs throughout it, in the cello, which returns as kind of the climax at the very end of the entire concerto.

"It's in an uneven meter, which also creates this kind of darkness, I think."

Mazzoli described the concerto as an "inherently dramatic form" which almost pits the soloist against the orchestra. The composer uses *Procession's* five movements to look back at healing rituals which came out of the medieval era.

"In a way, it's like a pandemic concerto," Koh says. "I think this idea of rituals came up because, at least for me, as a performer it's a very structured life when you're on tour, in terms of performance day, in terms of the number of days you've rehearsed, in terms of the preparation process.

"Then suddenly the pandemic hit and all performances were gone. Even the kind of ritual of going out with your friends and interacting with them had all disappeared.

"So it felt natural that we would go into this kind of idea, not only of looking back historically, but how humans might have even emotionally dealt with their own versions of the Black Death.

"It felt very natural to have gone looking in the past for answers in the present."

Procession is part of *Fantastical Journeys* at Adelaide Town Hall on March 18. Jennifer Koh also performs at UKARIA on March 19. adelaidefestival.com.au



US violinist Jennifer Koh.
Picture: Frank Jurgen