



Juliana Soltis, left, Kristin Lee, and Jennifer Koh



SOLTIS: SARAH KANE, LEE: LAUREN DESBERG, KOH: CHRISTINA WALKER

AMERICAN DREAMS

Artists reflect on the rich musical heritage—and promise—of the United States

By Laurence Vittes

It's hard to say when, exactly, it began, the recent trend in album releases and concert series exploring the concept of America. But it became noticeable just after the pandemic. The Experiential Orchestra's *American Counterpoints* in 2021. Daniel Hope's *America* in 2022. And slowly more and more artists joined in, adding their own ideas, experiences, interests. The Miró Quartet's *Home*, Augustin Hadelich's *American Road Trip*, Silkroad's *American Railroad*, the Pacifica Quartet's *American Stories* and *American Voices*. These projects—exploring themes from underrepresented voices to

contemporary works and distinct musical genres—reveal each artist's or ensemble's unique thoughts on what America represents and their intent to speak directly to listeners. Their voices form a rich tapestry of perspectives that, together, create aspirational new visions of America. The resonance of their music underscores that these inspirations are shared, connecting the past to the present in profound ways.

Juliana Soltis' album *American Woman*, a collaboration with pianist Ruoting Li, takes an emotionally charged journey through music by Mary Howe, Amy Beach, Margaret

Bonds, Helen Crane, Dorothy Rudd Moore (her searing *Dirge and Deliverance*), and Florence Price. Soltis' aim is to honor the often-overlooked legacy of women in American classical music. "I have never before felt the kind of profound purpose I did in recording *American Woman*," she says. "Rediscovering the story of these women upends our understanding of musical heritage in the most delightfully subversive and distinctly American way.

"These women stood shoulder to shoulder with giants like Ives, Copland, William Grant Still, and Bernstein, and held their

own. Being able to tell their stories was both an honor and a deeply humbling experience. Since I was 11, when I first asked my quartet coach if we'd ever play music by 'girl composers,' this is the recording I've been preparing my whole life to make."

Soltis expresses surprise that, despite so many women now working in classical music, she still often feels "like the odd one out" in male-dominated spaces. "It's amazing to know that women have always been part of America's cultural conversation. We always will be. Even when I didn't realize it, I was never alone."

Violinist Kristin Lee offers a similar exploration with her debut solo album, *American Sketches*. The album, which comprises riveting performances of pieces by Thelonious Monk, Amy Beach, Harry Burleigh, J.J. Johnson, Joplin, John Novacek (his spectacular *4 Rags*), Kevin Puts, and Jonathan Ragonese, allowed Lee to delve into her personal connection to American music. "It was deeply rewarding," she tells me, "not only to share my violin playing with the world but also to use this as a way to tell my story and reflect on what 'America' represents. American music, I discovered, is remarkably versatile, adapting to the influences of multiple cultures while creating new sounds shaped by diverse inspirations. To me, this represents a celebration of our country's spirit—a vibrant fusion of ideas, values, and colors, all merging in a shared expression."

Another compelling voice in this nationwide dialogue is the improvising PUBLIQuartet, whose Grammy-nominated *What Is American* album and touring project explores the country's rich diversity of contemporary, blues, jazz, free, and rock-inflected music. Their latest program, *What Is American: Rhythm Nation*, which premiered in December at New York's Fotografiska as part of the Unfiltered Music Festival, delves into American rhythmic traditions as expressions of bodily autonomy and tacit history-keeping.

Through collaborations with Pulitzer finalist Jlin, Mazz Swift, Eddie Venegas, and Jeff Scott, the quartet weaves together a tapestry of cultural influences. Like other projects emerging in this moment, PUBLIQuartet's work demonstrates how American classical music continues to evolve through dialogue with diverse traditions, creating new forms of

expression that both honor heritage and point toward future possibilities.

Just a week after the 2024 election, the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., was scheduled at press time to present *Sounds of US*, a day-long music festival created and curated by violinist Jennifer Koh. Inspired by thoughts of the nation's 250th anniversary in 2026, *Sounds of US* also features music by Mary Howe, Amy Beach, Margaret Bonds, Helen Crane, Dorothy Rudd Moore, and Florence Price prominently throughout the event. Running from

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1 PM to 9 PM, the festival will include 40 commissioned world premieres.

Koh expresses her belief that American democracy, through the arts, has the potential to become a true meritocracy. "What I've discovered through the new works is that the abundance of voices is what makes American art so vital," she tells me. "It's not only our loss but a loss for global artistic culture if we don't advocate for these artists and their voices, whose echoes would otherwise reverberate into the future. This festival exemplifies why supporting these voices

is essential for all of us." Koh's vision is a powerful reminder that supporting diverse perspectives within the arts is not just a matter of representation but a crucial contribution to the world's cultural fabric.

These projects underscore the importance of American classical music's continued engagement with themes of belonging, diversity, and democratic ideals, the artists and their ambitious programming demonstrating that American musical institutions have the unique potential to facilitate complex national conversations.

One group with a particularly ambitious vision is the Houston-based Apollo Chamber Players, whose 2024–2025 season includes *We the People*, a series of four concerts exploring different aspects of American democracy and character. The series, intentionally timed around the election, began with *Liberty* on October 5, a program featuring actor George Takei narrating *The Book of Names* by Martin Regan, honoring the Japanese Americans who were interned during World War II.

Apollo founder Matthew Detrick describes a poignant moment in the performance when Takei read his own name. "He then shared a heartfelt essay on why activism matters to him. He stayed afterward, signing books for hours. Takei has been a hero of mine, not only for his role on *Star Trek* but for his advocacy work and the way he has changed lives through activism."

Detrick also explains how Apollo's mission, to "create musical harmony through exploration," has become more important in recent years. "We're all aware of the challenges facing American democracy. Apollo's second program in the series, *Opportunity*, featuring works by Britten, Erberk Eryilmaz, Miklós Rózsa, and Leo Brouwer, is scheduled for January 4, just days before the next administration takes office."

Reflecting on this remarkable moment in American music, Soltis sums up her perspective: "What sets American classical music apart is that if you're looking for a composer who looks like you or shares your cultural experience, they're out there! Our most significant composers and our greatest music won't always be found in history textbooks, so get out there—start exploring. In America, ours is a music with room for everyone." ■