

## **Violinist Jennifer Koh**

### **Luncheon and Annual Meeting on June 14, 2018 League of American Orchestras' 73rd National Conference Chicago, IL**

Thank you to the League and Jesse Rosen and Yoo-Jin Hong for giving me the time to speak with you here, today.

When I first discovered music and began making music, I simply loved the music itself and wanted to be part of this powerful, visceral form of human communication and connection. But I also grew up in a time when everyone was talking about the death of classical music and the death of the symphony orchestra. Because of this, for most of my life, I have thought a lot about music - both as an art form I love, and as an industry as a whole. I have asked a lot of questions about our shared history, our identity, our relevance, and our survival. This process of inquiry has made me mindful of what it means to be a participant in this history and tradition of music, and my own role and place within it.

I want to share the story of the beginning of my life in classical music in order to illustrate the impact that the choices, actions, and efforts of individuals made on my life. The individuals who opened doors for me at crucial points in my life, both for my musical development and for my career, transformed the course of my life, and gave me the life I have today. I want you to know that each and every one of us in the music world, has the capacity to create great impact on individual lives in our communities and each one of us has the power to be an active and transformative participant in history.

I am the daughter of Korean War refugees. My mother is originally from North Korea and spent her early childhood walking down the entirety of the Korean peninsula during the War. She came to the United States in 1965 on an F-1, student visa, and was able to apply for citizenship as a direct result of changes to US immigration policy with the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965. I am standing here before you because despite having begun her life running from mortar fire and begging for food, she made her way to the United States, worked as a nanny, earned a PhD in library science and taught at Dominican University in River Forest, Illinois for over 30 years. My mom gave me every opportunity that she did not have as a child, including a consistent education, violin lessons, and tickets to concerts.

My mother's history, and by extension, mine - is a familiar one for immigrants and specifically, Asian-Americans. I'm a part of the first generation of children, born to this new wave of immigrants who arrived after 1965, not of European descent, from outside the west. As a member of this new kind of American, I would like to tell you about my experiences as an Asian-American in classical music.

I was born and raised outside of Chicago. Chicago is the city where I first discovered how much I loved music and it is the place where I was lucky enough to attend concerts of the Chicago Symphony as a



young child. The experience of hearing a great musical ensemble like the CSO gave me the tools to imagine an entire world of sonic expression outside of my own abilities at the time. A few years after attending my first concert of the CSO, my first violin teacher, Mrs. Davis told my mom that I had some musical talent and should study with more advanced teachers at the Music Institute of Chicago. Several years later, I had the honor to make my debut with the Chicago Symphony when I was eleven years old.

Chicago is also the place where Zarin Mehta first heard me. He gave me my first recital at Ravinia and introduced me to members of the classical music world. Because of Zarin's efforts and advocacy, I met and played for Isaac Stern who then advised me to study with Jaime Laredo at the Curtis Institute of Music. And because of Zarin's efforts, I met and played for Felix Galimir who began mentoring me, directing me to attend the Marlboro Music Festival.

I have been fortunate to have a career in music since I left Chicago when I was sixteen. It has been a privilege for me to work with a lot of musicians over many years in a lot of different places and these experiences have given me the opportunity to observe responses to my work, and the work of others, locally, nationally, and internationally.

I've been intrigued in the last year by the work of American historian, Grace Wang, who uses the term "innate capacity" to describe the capital placed on the belief that different types of music originate from, and therefore belong to, a certain group of people from a certain place. It means that an asset, or an inheritance exists - an *essence* one is born into. This is not an asset available for accumulation in classical music because of the belief that mechanics such as technique can be imitated and practiced. Rather, the *essence* of music – its heart, its soul, and its spirit – is felt most palpably through blood lines. Basically, this means that when we say that someone - a musician - just understands Mozart or Schubert because that person is Viennese, and is from Vienna, and it flows through their blood, we are also saying that a person that is not Viennese, a person that is not of the west, a person not born with European blood, a foreigner – can never truly understand or express the *essence* – the soul – of this music.

While acknowledging that most orchestral musicians audition behind screens, the reality is that making music on stage does not occur behind a screen. What do we imagine when we think of German Sound? French Style? Russian Soul? What do we imagine when we think of Chinese Pianist? Korean Violinist? Japanese cellist? What do we imagine when we think Chinese-American Violinist? Korean-American Pianist? Japanese-American Violist? Indian-American Cellist?

Do we see a difference between those of us who have been born, raised and musically trained, here in America and Europe? Do we see that Asian-Americans are of the west and are non-white Americans? Or, do we simply see Asian-Americans as Asians, perpetually foreign? Do we still hold onto a racialized component that holds the belief that Asian-Americans, non-white Americans, might have technique which is practiced, but have no soul and do not have the *essence* to be true artists?



A recent study released by the Harvard Business Review in May, revealed that Asian-Americans are the least likely ethnic group in the United States to be promoted to managerial or executive positions. According to this report, it is easy to understand why Asian American representation may not seem to be an issue. In some key ways, Asian Americans are the most successful demographic group in the United States. As a group, Asian-Americans are more highly educated, with higher median incomes than any other racial group in this country. But, because we are highly represented, Asian-Americans are given little priority or attention in diversity programs. And in the end, this report reveals that, although diversity programs have helped groups like white women, out of all ethnic and gendered groups, Asian-American women are the least likely to be promoted to a leadership position. Any Asian-related programs that do exist are geared towards cultural inclusion programs which involves ethnic origin cultural programs, and not diversity programs for the Americans who are Asian.

When I was coming of age, Asian-Americans, women, and other people of color in classical music were still very scarce. I am grateful that I was nurtured and mentored by many members of the classical music community. But I am especially grateful to one of my teachers, Felix Galimir for actively advocating for my inclusion in classical music, and for sharing his own stories of being the victim of derision and racism when he was a young Jewish violinist in the Vienna Philharmonic. He lived only because Bronislaw Huberman, a prominent Jewish violinist and singular musician, saved his life by putting him on a boat in 1936 to what was then known as Palestine since there were restrictions in immigration before the change of United States immigration policy in 1965. It is important to remember that Jews were categorized as “non-white” in the 1930’s and 1940’s and one of the implications of United States immigration policy prior to 1965 was that of Felix’s ten Jewish colleagues in the Vienna Philharmonic, seven were killed by the Nazis.

I think a great deal about Huberman’s actions, the implications of his actions on Felix Galimir, and by extension, the implication of Huberman’s actions on my own life and his impact on thousands of people – his fellow musicians, their music students, and audience members past, present, and future.

As I have myself, become more empowered within this field, I am more mindful of considering our shared collective history of classical music, with its racial and gender-biased constructions. I ask myself what actions I can take to serve my artistic community, as well as the larger community I live in. I ask myself how my musical and artistic decisions impact my field of classical music both in the present, and in the future. I ask myself what actions I take to build a world that I believe in and want to be a part of.

My first action has been to be myself - a dedicated musician that is a true and complicated presence. I perform and advocate for both music that is considered “core” classical repertoire, as well as “new” music. I find inspiration in Jewish musicians like Felix Galimir who, in the face of a society that sought to exterminate his existence, understood that it was necessary for an artist that is a minority and an unwanted presence - to exist and to exist as a true, complicated artistic presence. (He too, advocated for music that was considered to be “the canon”, as well as music written in his own time, working with the composers that included Ravel, Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern.)



This kind of truthful, complicated presence has the power to transform culture. Jewish refugees and immigrants like Felix Galimir and Rudolf Serkin, and the children of these refugees and immigrants like Leonard Bernstein, Leon Fleisher, and Isaac Stern - initiated a new chapter for classical music in this country. Their presence had the power to inspire me to enter and continue working in this field. And today, this kind of presence has the power to inspire the imaginations of others like myself: girls, women, and people of color represented complexly and truthfully, giving them an opening to imagine and actuate a life in classical music.

While the majority of my work consists of performing works that are considered to be “canonical” repertoire, my second action has been to seek out, collaborate with, commission, and advocate for work by living composers. I create projects that connect music of the past to the present and I sustain collaborations with composers that are great musicians, some of whom, also happen to be, women and artists of color, people like Kaija Saariaho, Missy Mazzoli, Lisa Bielawa, Du Yun, Courtney Bryan, Tyshawn Sorey and Vijay Iyer.

I actively strive to find, and advocate for women and people of color because I believe that doing so will help all of us imagine a present and future world for classical music that expands our artistic community and our audiences, and truly represents and engages with the larger communities we live in. If we believe that classical music can transcend all boundaries of language, nationality, and religion, then let’s actively advocate for, and build a community that does transcend the categories of gender, sexual orientation, and race.

I have partnered with many of the composers I mentioned before, to build projects like *The New American Concerto Project*, asking them to write new works in the older form of a violin concerto while also using that musical form to engage with specific topics that we care fiercely about. For example, Vijay Iyer’s concerto, *Trouble* – the first to be written for this project - is titled after a quote by civil rights activist, U.S. Representative John Lewis, and has a movement dedicated to Vincent Chin, a Chinese-American beaten to death in Detroit in 1982 by two white American auto-factory workers who assumed he was Japanese and stealing their jobs. Because this happened before the passing of the Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 1997, these men were sentenced to two years probation and a fine. This concerto engages with, and gives voice to, a great trauma to the Asian-American community, a trauma that deeply affected me and my family. I believe that this project which engages American composers is important because it gives voice to segments of the population that classical music has not heard from before.

Because the majority of my work consists of performing what is considered to be “standard repertoire” works in classical music, I most often communicate the stories of those people that are not of my time, not of my race, and not of my gender. And in the end, I have found that the most rewarding part of making music, is truly listening, understanding, and communicating the voices and stories of people who are not like myself.



I invite you to ask whether the composers, conductors, and soloists in our programs - our fellow board members - our staff – our orchestra members - represent all members of the communities and cities in which we live. Are we hiring staff and are we looking for board members who will remind us that there are people in this country and in our communities, who have different familial, personal, and educational experiences from our own? If Asian-Americans are highly represented in our industry, and if Asian-Americans are a highly successful, non-white demographic in our country regarding median income levels and education, have we actively advocated for Asian-American inclusion on our boards, in our management, and in our leadership?

Self-identified white-Nationalist, Richard Spencer received his Master's degree in classical music from the University of Chicago. He and fellow white-nationalist, Jared Taylor have written extensively about classical music and their enthusiasm regarding our community of classical music – our audiences, our performers, and our composers. They identify classical music as white people's music, belonging to, written for, and performed by, only white people.

All of us are here, in this room because we believe in classical music. But what I ask of you, and what I ask of myself, is that we question our own complacency in our programming, in our choices of performers, conductors, and composers. Can we confront our complicity in adopting notions of classical music that might, perhaps against our best intentions, embrace a system that excludes huge swaths of our communities?

I believe in service to, and engagement with, the larger communities I live, and perform in. Therefore, my third action is to listen. I invite all of you here who care about your cities and communities, to tell me, and the musicians in your midst, about your communities and the challenges that your organizations have, so that we can serve your missions. Ask us to bring forth projects that will initiate conversations that your communities care about - so that we can put our imaginations in service to you.

I have commissioned duos from most of the composers in *The New American Concerto Project* so that we can embed ourselves in your communities, outside of your symphony halls, to reach different segments of your city - in your museums, schools, art galleries, and community centers. I have been giving talks similar to the one I am giving right now, at universities and in classrooms full of politically aware, intelligent, curious, and vibrant students searching for their places in the world, considering where they can invest their energy and attention.

In the end, the most important question is: Will we create a new, inclusive form of classical music that will impact classical music for generations? Will we be the person that Zarin Mehta was for me? Will we take action to advocate for and mentor a colleague or student? Will we be like Felix Galimir? Will we be generous, patient, and empathetic human beings and share our experience and wisdom with others that face similar struggles, that we did? Will we actively fight for the inclusion of those who do not look like us,



in the higher echelons of classical music? Will we be like Bronislaw Huberman? (Huberman was warned by Furtwangler that his career in Germany would be over if he published his open letter.) Will we sacrifice our own careers in service to what we believe is right? Will we sacrifice time out of our own days to help others? Will we care more about the welfare of others, than ourselves?

Imagine that the greatest masterpieces of classical music have yet to be written. Imagine that the greatest composers, conductors, and musicians are yet to be heard. Now imagine a future where we do take action to seek out, cultivate, and give opportunity to every member of our community, regardless of gender, race, or sexual orientation. Imagine that each of us takes action today so that we create a powerful, artistic world for the future – a world that is so inclusive, so multitudinous, so emotionally expansive that we cannot even imagine it today.

I want to thank and acknowledge those people who have helped me get to where I am. Pat Winter at Opus 3, Connie Shuman and Lisa Jaehnig, Jim Ginsburg at Cedille Records and so many of you, here today.

Thank you for listening and I look forward to listening to your stories as well.