

## Fanfare Magazine: Alone Together

Colin Clarke | February 2022



Perhaps there should be a series entitled “Lockdown Treasures.” This twofer is based on Jennifer Koh’s online performance series *Alone Together*, and includes 39 world premiere recordings. It is a response not only to isolation, but also to the hardship the pandemic has placed many in the arts community. All works are inspired by the composers’ experiences early in the pandemic; as Koh has herself said in interview, this album now represents a “musical archive” of this most significant time in history.

Astonishingly, this is Koh’s 15th album for Cedille, following on from *Bach & Beyond Part 3*, and *Limitless*. The producer is Judith Sherman. Mention of that fact alone should reassure one about

the quality of the recording; it is faultless.

The playing is as well. Koh conjures uncomfortable spaces, confronting our thoughts and fears and memories about the pandemic so far head on. Wang Lu’s *Hover and Recede* includes quiet evocations of sirens heard through the night, taking the characteristic “wee-wah” siren as the basis for melody. Joungbum Lee’s hovering green is inspired by Beethoven’s “Spring” Sonata and in some ways emerges as a prolongation of Lu’s piece before the more assertive lines of Morgan Guerin’s *Together, But Alone (In Quarantine)* sound out. Brief but eminently memorable, this bodes well for the music of this young composer.

A more familiar name provides the next piece, Vijay Iyer and his for violin alone, as objective a title as one could wish for. His piece quotes *Alone Together* from the *American Songbook*, within the context of a prevailing fragility. Koh’s sustaining of multiple lines here is miraculous. But perhaps it is the questions that come about because of Sarah Gibson’s *you are still here* (inspired by Mona Hatoum’s piece of art of the same name) that are most thought-provoking. Ruminations of continued survival at a time when Death is viscerally present manifest themselves here in quietude rather than in railing against Fate. Profound truths are whispered into our ears, and then seem to dissolve into Darian Donovan Thomas’s buzzing *Art I Nat* for violin and electronics.

One of the prevailing threads here is fragility, a concept named in Tonia Ko’s *The Fragile Season*, only to be cast aside by the broader gestures of Thomas Kotcheff’s *vacuum packed*, a piece that acts as an extrovert mini-homage to the composer’s favorite violin concerto (by Tchaikovsky). Nina Young, who lives in the same building as Koh, traces her reactions to the pandemic’s shutdown on travel, and how signals were surely missed in *There had been signs, surely*. (From a non-U.S. citizen’s perspective, there certainly did seem to be a lot of denial going on, although the UK really has no room to talk!) Even more quizzical in nature is Adelina Faizullina’s *Urman*, composed using a violin that only had the second and third strings. The title means “forest” in the composer’s native Tartar, and reflects how music can constrict places of refuge. It is a most memorable piece, and as with everything on this twofer is stunningly played.

Inspired by a vocal improvisation during a meditation on a flowing river—and one can hear aspects of a stream of consciousness (no pun intended, although it's a rather apposite one, as it goes)—is Jen Shyu's *The River in My Mind*. The piece is also suffused with longing (composed amongst concrete, it reflects the composer's yearning for Nature in its expressive phrases).

It is ever fascinating how different the compositional voices are here, and how juxtaposition illuminates. Listening to Inti Figgis-Vizueta's beautiful quiet city (& easter bells from the bowery) against Ellen Reid's invocation of claustrophobia, *Brick Red Mood*, brings out the best of both pieces, while the beauty of the lines of Rajna Swaminathan's kindling seem highlighted after the Reid—freed from the constraints of those walls, perhaps. And how Koh's violin sings in this piece.

The keywords behind Anthony Cheung's *Springs Eternal* are quiet resilience, something he masterfully incorporates into his music via alternations of gestures—a modern-day Orpheus taming of the beasts of the pandemic, perhaps. And Anjna Swaminathan, in writing a beloved within, finds herself able to express through music aspects of herself and her own mental state that enable her to come to terms with them (helped along by some writings by the great Krishnamurthi), and in doing so relocates oneself. A related response is Layale Chaker's *Song of the Beloved*, a song of remembrance for others that are not at a particular time physically available. To end the first disc, the expression of anger through an imitation of the wailing of electric guitars in David Serkin Ludwig's *All the Rage* is a remarkable set of sounds, representing disquiet not only at the pandemic but of the ineptitude of authoritarian reactions to it.

Inspired by Kahlil Gilbran, Lebanese-Australian composer Elizabeth Younan offers a solo line that is a fascinating journey, decidedly dance-like at times, angular but not so as one might cut oneself. Blink and you miss Rafiq Bhatia's *Descent*, and yet it deserves attention both for its basis and its realization. It works with how one experiences time during a crisis, as well as meditating on how human beings seem incapable of experiencing exponential growth; the panic that results (as in the dawning realization of a pandemic) is, in retrospect, both shocking and avoidable. Hamna Benn's exhalation could be labeled as mindfulness in musical form, a way of making conscious what is normally unconscious; as we do so, Benn handles her materials with a palpable sense of wonder, aided and abetted by Koh's beautiful phrasing. This is an every day, every minute, every second occurrence: How can it hold such wonder? We surely must ask ourselves.

It is Milton's *Paradise Lost* that holds the title of Missy Mazzoli's piece *Hail, Horrors, Hail!*, written at the very beginning of the pandemic. Are those echoes of the *Berg Violin Concerto* I hear right at the end? It is another piece that focuses on loss, of course. In timbral contrast comes the playful opening of Cassie Wieland's *shiner*, a piece "for anyone in need of something small and beautiful," a description that could fit the piece itself perfectly. I think therefore this is "shiner" like a tealight or a star, not a black eye.

The act of touching surfaces inspired Katherina Balch's *Cleaning*. The piece includes a wiping down of the violin's strings, and the performer is instructed to perform in gloves, a nod towards the "New Hygiene" (my term) the pandemic has brought with it.

Responses to isolation are myriad, of course, but a common one must be boredom. Andrew Norman's *Turns of Phrase* asks, musically, how many different ways can we ask the same question. But it is a delicate question here, whispered, and yet it seeks a way out as much as an answer. Cooper and Emma in the piece of that name by Angelica Migron are two German dogs who appear on videos; the music

reflects their playfulness beautifully before the more introspective Anima by Tania Leon takes center stage, a reflection on loneliness within connection. We're all connected these days, more than ever; but disconnection, both between humans and within individuals themselves, is surely at an all-time high, and Leon considers this in a long, tortured melody.

The glassy world of Caroline Davis's heart rituals reflects a "see-saw" of thoughts oscillating between extremes during the pandemic's isolation period, while Nina Shekhar's warm in my veins quotes nurse Clara Barton to ruminate on the shadow of our ancestors at this time. This is a most poignant piece, technically demanding at times, with a core of beauty despite its surface scrapings. Perhaps there is an echo of this in Shayna Dunkelman's Afterglow, inspired by the unnatural quiet of lockdowns.

The booklet note for Du Yun's Windowsills is precisely this: "()". Ironically one of the longer pieces, the violin line swoops like a curlew. Inspired by the LP Weird Nightmare, in which Mingus's music is reimagined via the instruments of Harry Partch, Qasim Naqvi's HAL celebrates the producer of that LP, who sadly lost his life to COVID.

I like the way George Lewis speaks the truth that while many people saw lockdowns as a prime opportunity to get work done, the reality was often very different (and, although he does not refer to this, it frequently included baking). Lewis's Un petit brouillard cérébral is a piece that refers to brain fog, in an attempt to lift it, while Lester St. Louis's Ultraviolet. Efflorescent is a meditation on the unseen. It leads, naturally, to the almost inaudible musical surfaces of Sugar Vendril's Simple Tasks 2: Six-day deadline. The composer used "simple tasks" to attain focus and stability.

The soundworld of Patrick Castillo's Mina Cecilia's Constitutional is fascinating. Another piece that considers routines, it does so by simultaneously noting the contrast between beautiful immediate surroundings and the chaos in the external world. In a beautifully off-the-wall take on the remit, Vincent Callianno's 54 second Ashliner reconstructs the sound of a skipping compact disc via the medium of a single violinist. Finally, Katie Agócs's Thirst and Quenching, is a light, vibrant piece that initially becomes more interior (a reflection of the elongation of the pandemic's hiatus) before finding some sense of release.

The mix of known names and new ones in the composer list to this release is most refreshing. Violinist Jennifer Koh has the most remarkable ability to communicate a multiplicity of markedly different voices through her instrument to the listener. She whispers profound truths in our ears; try Sarah Gibson's You are still here first as the prime example of that.

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