



presents...

The Shenson Great Artists & Ensemble Series

JENNIFER KOH | Violin
THOMAS SAUER | Piano

Friday, February 20, 2026 | 7:30pm
Herbst Theatre

LILI BOULANGER **D'un matin de printemps**

Two Pieces for Violin and Piano

Nocturne

Cortège

TANIA LEÓN **Para Violín y Piano (2024)**

MAURICE RAVEL **Violin Sonata No. 2 in G Major**

I. Allegretto

II. Moderato

III. Allegro

INTERMISSION

KAIJA SAARIAHO **Tocar**

GABRIEL FAURÉ **Violin Sonata No. 1 in A Major, Op. 13**

I. Allegro molto

II. Andante

III. Allegro vivo

IV. Allegro quasi presto

**This series is made possible in part by the generous support of
Fred M. Levin, The Shenson Foundation.**

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Jennifer Koh is represented by Opus 3 Artists
250 West 34th Street, WorkLife Office, Suite 313, New York, NY 10119 opus3artists.com

Thomas Sauer thomassauer.net

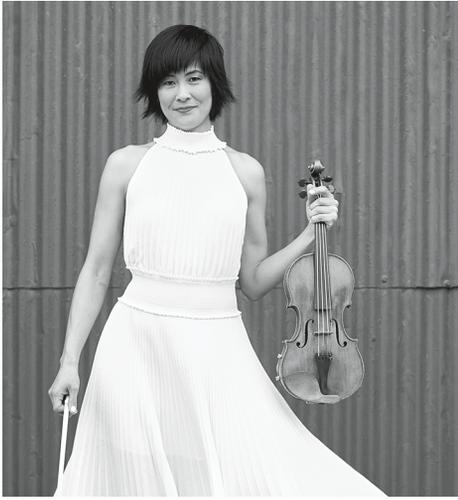
Steinway Model D, Pro Piano, San Francisco.

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ARTIST PROFILES

San Francisco Performances presents Jennifer Koh for the 14th time. She first appeared here in November 2015.

Thomas Sauer makes his San Francisco Performances debut with tonight's performance.



Grammy® Award-winning violinist **Jennifer Koh** is recognized for her fierce musical intelligence, dazzling virtuosity, and relentless commitment to innovation in classical music. Renowned for her ability to bridge centuries of repertoire with bold contemporary voices, she has premiered over 100 works and redefined the role of the modern violinist through her commissioning projects, interdisciplinary collaborations, and curatorial leadership.

Koh's 2025–26 season highlights her dynamic presence both on stage and behind the scenes. Now in her third year as Artistic Director of the Fortas Chamber Music Concerts at the Kennedy Center, she continues to shape the series with a focus on artistic equity, musical evolution, and bold new work. Under her leadership, Fortas has commissioned over 40 new compositions to date. This season, as part of the series, Koh performs *Bridge to Beethoven* with longtime collaborator pianist Thomas Sauer, pairing Beethoven's "Kreutzer" Sonata with Vijay Iyer's *Bridgetower Fantasy*. She has also curated performances by artists including Nicholas Phan and Myra Huang, Brentano Quartet with Hsin-Yun Huang, Takács Quartet with Jordan Bak, Viano Quartet with Anthony McGill, and yMusic.

Koh begins the season in residence at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music in Singapore and performs Brahms's *Violin Concerto* with the Shreveport Symphony conducted by Michael Butterman. Additional engagements include a San Francisco Performances recital with Sauer featur-

ing the west coast premiere of Tania León's *Para*, and performances honoring Philip Glass' 90th Birthday with the Vermont Symphony and the Atlanta Symphony, performing his *Violin Concerto No. 1*.

She returns to her alma mater for an extended residency with Oberlin College's Contemporary Music Ensemble, where she will continue exploring her New American Concerto series, a multi-year initiative reimagining the violin concerto form through collaborations with composers. This year, the programs feature Courtney Bryan's *Szyggy*, a work inspired by artists Alma Thomas, Frida Kahlo, and Maya Ying Lin, with movements corresponding to each artist's work, and Vijay Iyer's *Trouble*. She will also appear with the Boulder Philharmonic performing Barber's *Violin Concerto*.

Founder of the nonprofit ARCO Collaborative, Koh advocates for works by women and artists of color and remains a powerful voice for inclusion and innovation in classical music. She is also on faculty at the Mannes School of Music and frequently appears in residence at major universities. For more, visit jenniferkoh.com.

American pianist **Thomas Sauer** performs regularly as soloist, chamber musician, and recital partner. Audiences and critics alike praise his playing for its clarity, expressivity, and assured stylistic sense.

Some of Mr. Sauer's recent solo appearances include concertos with the Quad-City and Tallahassee Symphonies, and recitals at Simon's Rock and Mannes Colleges, St. Joseph's University, Merkin Concert Hall, Rockefeller University, and St. John's College, Oxford.

With his long-time duo partner, English cellist Colin Carr, Mr. Sauer has appeared at the Wigmore Hall (London), the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, and the Gardner Museum (Boston). Other duo recitals include violinists Jennifer Koh (Kennedy Center, Kimmel Center, Princeton University) and Midori (Berlin Philharmonie and the Palais des Beaux Arts, Brussels).

Among Mr. Sauer's chamber music credits are performances at the Chamber Music Societies of Boston, Lincoln Center and Philadelphia; performances with members of the Juilliard String Quartet at the Library of Congress; and numerous concerts with the Brentano String Quartet.

Mr. Sauer has performed at many of the leading festivals in the United States and abroad, including Marlboro, Caramoor, Music@Menlo, Chamber Music Northwest, El Paso Pro Musica, and the Chamber Music Festivals of Seattle, Taos, Four Seasons (North Carolina), Portland, and Salt Bay (Maine);

as well as Lake District Summer Music (England) and Festival des Consonances (France).

He has premiered works by Robert Cuckson, Sebastian Currier, Donald Martino, Harold Meltzer, Ruth Schonthal, Nathan Shields, Suzanne Sorkin, and Richard Wilson, among many others. A committed teacher, with students at Mannes and Vassar Colleges, Mr. Sauer was the founder and director of the Mannes Beethoven Institute, a highly regarded week-long summer training program that ran for fifteen seasons in New York. He is Co-Founder and Director of Chamber Music Quad Cities, a performing organization in his hometown of Davenport, Iowa.

PROGRAM NOTES

D'un matin de printemps

Two Pieces for Violin and Piano

LILI BOULANGER

(1893–1918)

The younger sister of the great teacher Nadia Boulanger, Lili Boulanger was a musician of extraordinary talent. A student of Fauré, Lili was the first woman ever to win the Prix de Rome, but that promise was cut short by perpetually poor health and by an early death: she was only 24 when she died, ten days before the death of Debussy. So short a life inevitably means that one's output is small, and today Lili is remembered for her vocal settings and a small amount of instrumental music. As might be expected from the sister of Nadia Boulanger, Lili's music is beautifully crafted. She has been described as an impressionist, but more striking are her instinctive sense of form and an expressive control of what is at times a surprisingly chromatic harmonic language.

In 1917, late in her brief life, Lili composed two mood-pieces, each inspired by a different time of day: the subdued *D'un soir triste* ("Of a Sad Evening") and the lively *D'un matin de printemps* ("Of a Spring Morning"). She composed the latter first as a duo for violin (or flute) and piano, then arranged the music for string trio, and finally arranged it for full orchestra. She was still working on the orchestral version when she died early in 1918, and it was left to her sister Nadia to supply a certain number of dynamic and phrase markings. The music has been widely performed and recorded in all three versions.

Marked *Assez animé* ("Very lively"), the

opening section bursts to life on the work's dancing, dotted main theme. Listeners may be struck by the nice sense of instrumental color here—in addition to its many wind solos, this section has solo passages for the concertmaster, principal second violin, principal viola, and principal cello. *D'un matin de printemps* is in three-part form, and it slows slightly for its central episode. Though slower, the mood remains upbeat (the performance marking here is *ardent, heureux*: “ardent, happy”), and one senses the influence of Debussy in both expression and instrumentation. Solo oboe leads the way back to the opening material, but that return is not literal, and tempos and colors shift subtly before the music reaches its lively conclusion on a great, happy swoop of sound.

Lili Boulanger composed the *Nocturne* in 1911, when she was 18, and the *Cortège* three years later (1914). *Nocturne* begins quietly as the pianist rocks softly across three octaves of repeated C's and the violin sings its gentle song. But soon the quiet mood of the beginning (marked *doux*: “soft, gentle”) is penetrated by unexpected harmonies, the violin line grows more animated, and the music rises to a climax. Matters calm, the rocking accompaniment of the opening reasserts itself, and *Nocturne* concludes in the home key of F major, with the violin high above, the piano in its deepest register. The title *Cortège* might seem to suggest something funereal, or at least ceremonial, but Boulanger's *Cortège* is sprightly music, spirited and fun. Over an extremely active piano accompaniment, the violin has its own energetic line. This music concludes all too quickly, leaving behind its high spirits—and a sense of what might have been.

Para Violín y Piano

TANIA LEÓN
(B. 1943)

Tania León's *Para Violín y Piano* (for violin and piano) was commissioned by the Leonora Jackson McKim Fund in the Library of Congress, and was premiered April 8, 2025, at The Library of Congress Coolidge Auditorium by Jennifer Koh and Thomas Sauer.

Sonata in G Major for Violin and Piano

MAURICE RAVEL
(1875–1937)

Ravel began making sketches for his Vi-

olin Sonata in 1923, the year after he completed his orchestration of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. He was composing a number of works for violin during these years, including *Tzigane*, but the *Violin Sonata* proved extremely difficult for him, and he did not complete it until 1927. The first performance, by violinist Georges Enescu and the composer, took place on May 30, 1927, in Paris while that city was still in a dither over the landing of Charles Lindbergh the week before.

In the *Violin Sonata*, Ravel wrestled with a problem that has plagued all who compose violin sonatas—the clash between the resonant, sustained sound of the violin and the percussive sound of the piano—and he chose to accentuate these differences: “It was this independence I was aiming at when I wrote a Sonata for violin and piano, two incompatible instruments whose incompatibility is emphasized here, without any attempt being made to reconcile their contrasted characters.” The most distinctive feature of the sonata, however, is Ravel's use of jazz elements in the slow movement.

The opening *Allegretto* is marked by emotional restraint. The piano alone announces the cool first theme, which is quickly picked up by the violin. A sharply rhythmic figure, much like a drum tattoo, contrasts with the rocking, flowing character of the rest of this movement, which closes on a quietly soaring restatement of the main theme.

Ravel called the second movement *Blues*, but he insisted that this is jazz as seen by a Frenchman. In a lecture during his American tour of 1928, he said of this movement: “while I adopted this popular form of your music, I venture to say that nevertheless it is French music, Ravel's music, that I have written.” He sets out to make violin and piano sound like a saxophone and guitar, specifying that the steady accompanying chords must be played strictly in time so that the melodic line can sound “bluesy” in contrast. The “twang” of this movement is accentuated by Ravel's setting the violin in G major and the piano in A-flat major at the opening.

Thematic fragments at the very beginning of the finale slowly accelerate to become a virtuoso perpetual motion. Ravel brings back themes from the first two movements before the brilliant close, which features complex string-crossings for the violinist.

Tocar

KAIJA SAARIAHO
(1952–2023)

In 2009 Kaija Saariaho was asked to compose a brief competition piece for the 2010 International Jean Sibelius Violin Competition of the Sibelius Society and Sibelius Academy. She completed the work, which she titled *Tocar*, in December 2009, and it was first played by all twenty semi-finalists at the competition in Helsinki the following November.

The composer prepared a brief introduction to this work:

One of my first ideas for Tocar, about the encounter of two instruments as different as the violin and piano, was the question: how could they touch each other?

Whilst composing music, I always imagine the instrumentalist's fingers and their sensitivity. The violin sounds are created by the collaboration between the left hand and the bow controlled by the right hand. On the piano, the pianist should be extremely precise in order to control the moment when the fingers touch the keys, afterwards the sounds can be coloured only by the pedals. In spite of such different mechanisms, both instruments also have some common points, purely musical, noticeably they share some of the same register.

In Tocar both instruments move forward independently, but also keep an eye on each other. I imagine a magnetism becoming stronger and stronger—the piano part becomes more mobile—which draws the violin texture towards the piano writing culminating in an encounter in unison. After this short moment of symbiosis, the violin line is released from the measured piano motion, continuing its own life outside the laws of gravity.

The title, in Spanish, translates as “to touch, to play.”

—Kaija Saariaho, Paris, November 29th 2010

Violin Sonata No. 1 in A Major, Opus 13

GABRIEL FAURÉ
(1845–1924)

One of Fauré's students, the composer Florent Schmitt, described his teacher as an “unintentional, unwitting revolutionary.” The term “revolutionary” hardly seems to apply to a composer best-known for his gentle *Requiem*, songs, and chamber works. But while Fauré was no heaven-storming radical bent on undoing the past, his seemingly qui-

et music reveals enough rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic surprises to justify Schmitt's claim. The *Violin Sonata in A Major*, written in the summer of 1876 while Fauré was vacationing in Normandy, is dedicated to his friend, the violinist Paul Viardot. Following its first performance, the sonata was praised by Fauré's teacher Saint-Saëns for its "formal novelty, quest, refinement of modulation, curious sonorities, use of the most unexpected rhythms ...charm [and]...the most unexpected touches of boldness." This is strong praise, but close examination of the Sonata shows that Saint-Saëns was right.

One of the most interesting features of the opening *Allegro molto* occurs in the accompaniment, which is awash in a constant flow of eighth-notes. The piano immediately hints at the first theme, and that instrument is busily weaving a filigree of accompanying eighth-notes that will shimmer throughout this movement when the violin enters to sing that theme fully. The movement is in the expected sonata form,

and the violin's falling second subject is accompanied by murmuring triplets from the piano. There is an elegance and grace about this movement that is easy to sense but difficult to describe. It can also be passionate music, and the movement concludes on a fiery restatement of its opening theme.

Distinguishing the *Andante* is its rhythmic pulse: a 9/8 meter throbs throughout the movement, though Fauré varies its effect by syncopating the accents within the measure. The third movement, a scherzo marked *Allegro vivo*, goes like a rocket. Fauré chooses not the expected triple meter of the traditional scherzo but a time signature of 2/8, an extremely short rhythmic unit, particularly when his metronome marking asks for 152 quarter-notes per minute. He further complicates the rhythm by writing in quite short phrases, so that the effect is of short phrases rapidly spit out, then syncopated by sharp off-beats. A lovely, graceful trio gives way to the opening material, and the movement suddenly van-

ishes in a shower of pizzicato notes.

The tempo marking for the finale—*Allegro quasi presto*—seems to suggest a movement similar to the third, but despite its rapid tempo the last movement flows easily and expressively. Or at least it seems to, for here Fauré complicates matters harmonically. The piano opens in the home key—A major—but the violin seems always to prefer F-sharp minor, and the resulting harmonic uncertainty continues throughout the movement until the sonata ends in unequivocal A major.

To emphasize this sonata's originality may have the unhappy effect of making the music sound cerebral, interesting only for its technical novelty. That is hardly the case. Fauré's *Sonata in A Major* is one of the loveliest violin sonatas of the late nineteenth century, full of melodic, graceful, and haunting music.

—Program notes by Eric Bromberger