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# News

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## VIOLINIST JENNIFER KOH PAINTS VIVID 'PORTRAITS' WITH GRANT PARK ORCHESTRA

Rarely Played Works by Szymanowski, Martinů, and Bartók  
on First CD Recorded in Chicago's New Harris Theater

Violinist Jennifer Koh and Chicago's Grant Park Orchestra, with principal conductor Carlos Kalmar, perform compelling, rarely heard concertos by three innovative, twentieth-century European composers on *Portraits: Violin Concertos by Szymanowski, Martinů & Bartók* (Cedille Records CDR 90000 089).

The CD takes its title from Bartók's autobiographical *Two Portraits*, Op. 5 (1911). Although Szymanowski's Violin Concerto No. 1, Op. 35 (1916), and Martinů's Violin Concerto No. 2, H. 293 (1943), make no extra-musical references, "both are colorful works with a pictorial quality," notes Cedille president and recording producer James Ginsburg.

He adds, "The most celebrated recordings of the Szymanowski and Martinů concertos — by David Oistrakh and Josef Suk, respectively — are more than three decades old. Record collectors will surely welcome standout performances in modern sound."

The CD is the first commercial recording to emerge from Chicago's two-year-old Harris Theater for Music and Dance, a 1,525-seat hall built below ground in Millennium Park along Michigan Avenue. The performances were recorded live during the Grant Park Music Festival in July 2004 and July 2005.

Karol Szymanowski (1882-1937) was the foremost Polish composer of the early twentieth century. His exotic and otherworldly Violin Concerto No. 1 is a single-movement work comprising

three sections played without pause. The transcendent score utilizes the violin's full range but emphasizes its upper register.

Szymanowski, like Mahler in his symphonies, spotlights individual orchestral sections — winds, horns, low strings — in the interplays with the solo violin. “The influence of the late-Romantic music of Mahler and Richard Strauss is obvious,” Andrea Lamoreaux of WFMT Radio writes in the CD notes. “But in the end the work doesn't sound like them: it sounds like Szymanowski.”

In a concert review, *Chicago Sun-Times* critic Wynne Delacoma said Koh's performance in the Szymanowski exemplified “the best kind of sophistication, a blend of fluid technique, thoughtful intensity and sweetness of tone. . . . Koh's luminous, focused violin floated like an inextinguishable star above the orchestra. . . . Kalmar and Koh reached for the heights but kept a firm grasp on the concerto's underlying architecture.”

The sumptuous Violin Concerto No. 2 of Czech composer Bohuslav Martinů (1890-1959) displays his characteristic vitality, charm, and originality. He wrote the piece during his World War II sojourn in New England. It was commissioned by violinist Mischa Elman, who was introduced to the composer by Boston Symphony Orchestra music director Serge Koussevitzky, a steadfast champion of Martinů's music. Lamoreaux describes it as “an extroverted work that blends tunefulness, dissonance, and rhythmic complexity into a meaty romp for both soloist and orchestra.”

The *Sun-Times'* Delacoma wrote that Koh's playing in the Martinů concerto “sounded heartfelt and fresh,” while conductor Kalmar “shaped it beautifully, emphasizing the playfulness in the catchy rhythms and very American-style swagger of its final movement.”

Visiting *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* critic Sarah Bryan Miller wrote, “Martinů puts heavy demands on the soloist, but Koh played this extremely difficult work with great skill and equal feeling. She has a forceful personality to go with her technical abilities.”

In *Two Portraits*, Hungary's Béla Bartók (1881-1945) expresses the blissful ups and bitter downs of his youthful, romantic infatuation with nineteen-year-old violinist Stefi Geyer. The work is

in two parts, both based on the same melodic fragment — “your leitmotiv” is how Bartók described it to Geyer. The first and longer of the two (which also serves as the opening movement of Bartók’s Violin Concerto No. 1) is titled “Idealistic.” It brims with youthful passion, irresistible lyricism, and angelic beauty. Koh “exhibited a gorgeous singing tone,” Bryan Miller wrote. The second part, “Distorted,” omits the solo violin. It is a short, grotesque rendering of the original theme, a sarcastic send-off to the beautiful young woman who ultimately spurned the composer.

Jennifer Koh’s previous recordings for Cedille Records include *Solo Chaconnes* by Bach, Barth, and Reger and *Violin Fantasies* (with pianist Reiko Uchida) by Schubert, Schumann, Schoenberg, and Ornette Coleman. This is Cedille’s third recording with the Grant Park Orchestra and Maestro Kalmar. Their 2004 CD *Symphonic Works by Robert Kurka* was nominated for a Grammy Award.

Cedille Records (pronounced say-DEE’) is dedicated to showcasing the most noteworthy classical artists in and from Chicago. The nonprofit label is an arm of The Chicago Classical Recording Foundation. For a free catalog and the locations of local retail outlets, contact Cedille Records, 5255 N. Lakewood Ave., Chicago, IL 60640-2220, call (773) 989-2515; E-mail: [info@cedillerecords.org](mailto:info@cedillerecords.org). On the Net: [www.cedillerecords.org](http://www.cedillerecords.org).

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Martinů & Bartók*

(Cedille Records CDR 90000 089)

**Szymanowski: Violin Concerto No. 1, Op. 35 (1916)**

**Martinů: Violin Concerto No. 2, H. 293 (1943)**

**Bartók: *Two Portraits*, Op. 5 (1911)**

**Jennifer Koh, violin  
Grant Park Orchestra  
Carlos Kalmar, conductor**