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Stylistic Tangling At Tanglewood In Concerto Premiere

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The New York-based orchestra collective Knights performed Vijay Iyer's 'Trouble' with violinist Jennifer Koh at Tanglewood.

(Photo by Sarah Small)

By Keith Powers

LENNOX, Mass. – Composer [Vijay Iyer](#) has a jazz trio and was *DownBeat*'s artist of the year in 2015 and 2016. He's collaborated with Wadada Leo Smith, Roscoe Mitchell, DJ Spooky, and poets such as Amiri Baraka and Robert Pinsky. Sometimes he writes "conductions" – improvised works with conductor. He's composed for the Brentano Quartet and Brooklyn Rider. He wrote a dissertation about sound structures in African music. But before you scream "crossover," Iyer has a better word: "community."



Jennifer Koh

He couldn't find more fitting exponents than [The Knights](#), the New York-based orchestra collective, to explore his latest composition, the concerto [Trouble](#), written for violinist [Jennifer Koh](#). They assembled at [Tanglewood](#) on July 13 in Ozawa Hall to explore the half-hour composition, which challenged even Koh's prodigious technique. It was part of a program ranging from Purcell to John Adams, through Iyer and back to Mozart, showing off the collaborative and democratic versatility of the Knights. Founded more than a decade ago, emerging from house readings organized by brothers Eric (who sometimes conducts) and Colin (concertmaster, most of the time) Jacobsen, the Knights embrace a "we're here to make music with you" notion that encompasses old and new as well as audience and performer.

So it was more than symbolic that the evening began with half a dozen violinists playing drone pitches, dispersed throughout the audience. The drones created an anchor for Purcell's [Fantasia upon One Note](#) while a quartet onstage investigated the composer's brief, inventive polyphony. Then somehow Eric Jacobsen emerged and the ensemble united onstage for an *attacca* transition vaulting over three centuries directly to John Adams' [Common Tones in Simple Time](#).

The point is community. Iyer made that connection at California's [Ojai Music Festival](#) in June, where he was this year's music director and where [Trouble](#) premiered. Co-commissioners of the concerto include the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and that's how the piece came so quickly to Tanglewood. Iyer was in attendance, and he hopped onstage to chat before the work began. He talked about workshopping [Trouble](#) with Koh over the past year, examining the relationship of soloist to ensemble. And – inevitably these days — about how the piece came in response to current political events.

Despite his remarks on that subject ("think about unity," he said, "and what we can do as a collective"), this is a concerto, a work that showcases the virtuosity of a soloist with an orchestra supporting and embellishing. Iyer mentioned studies of concerti by Ligeti and Stravinsky, and Bernstein's [Serenade](#), but [Trouble](#) reminds one most of [Gunther Schuller](#). Creamy pastoral melodies get quickly overrun by technical expansions (con legno, ponticello, violent pizzicato), zooming the work off into funk, jazz, or invitingly minimalist textures.



Composer Vijay Iyer (Jimmy Katz)

Trouble traverses six movements, fancifully labeled and difficult to distinguish. The introductory “Erasure” has Koh breaking out a ponticello drone; while a solo flute searches through ideas she shifts to a repeating figure as the orchestra finally joins in. The minimalistic accompaniment creates anticipation, rewarded finally by a slow lament from the soloist in a continuous line with pizzicato and percussive orchestral background. A whirlwind of ideas follows. At one point, the second violins bow with pencils, creating a scratchy patina to a funk breakdown. This movement could be a scherzo, as it gets interrupted with a melodic trio section. But the repeat is brief and incomplete as the funk morphs into a terrific rainstick and horn duet.

More ideas come tumbling out. The dynamic Koh owned the difficult score, shifting from one extended technique to the next and filling the spaces with furious bowings, including double-stops that created exotic overtones. Then a cadenza — it is doubtful Iyer called it that, but it was a solo excursion that preceded the coda — brought scales that demanded increasing tempo and volume, growing into a multi-voiced, Bach-like complexity. A tense and loud cadence stuck a pause right at the climax. Koh inserted a gentle phrase, and then it was done.

Although it is hard to imagine any other soloist tackling this score, *Trouble* belongs in the concerto universe. With multiple commissioners — Ojai, the BSO, and UC-Berkeley — and a language that speaks directly to audiences through musical sophistication, not simplicity, *Trouble* deserves repeated investigations.



Eric Jacobsen conducts The Knights in Ozawa Hall. (Photo: Hilary Scott)

The rest of the program had energy, both good and bad. *Common Tones in Simple Time* — the common tones are its repeated triads, its simple time an un-Adams-like reliance on 2/2 or 4/4 — is early (1980s) minimalism. Out-of-phase strings and piano build a mood, but colors from winds and percussion, layered over the basic, recurring patterns make the work much more than an exercise in counting. Textures come and go unexpectedly, including a cello figure using what looks like a bottleneck slide, creating a metallic glissando. The piece was beautifully played.

After intermission, the Knights shifted gears and personnel, too, for Mozart’s great G minor Symphony No. 40, K.550. Eric Jacobsen abandoned the podium for a cello desk, and violinist [Guillaume Pirard](#) led the ensemble as concertmaster. Most of the players stood, with the second violins and violas stage left and the remaining strings stage right. That created an inviting balance between bass and treble instruments and allowed the seconds to show off Mozart’s part writing. But the playing was less convincing than the approach. Exaggerated dynamics and amped-up tempos inserted a sort of enthusiasm for the opening Allegro. Mozart can take it, but many subtleties got trampled. The same approach — playing to the extremes — turned the Andante into something saccharine. The Minuet demands (and received) a more varied approach, and the Allegro finale, lifting off with its Mannheim Rockets, those ascending scales that Mozart often used, made for a happier conclusion.

Keith Powers covers music and the arts for GateHouse Media and WBUR’s ARTery. Follow [@PowersKeith](#).

Date posted: July 15, 2017

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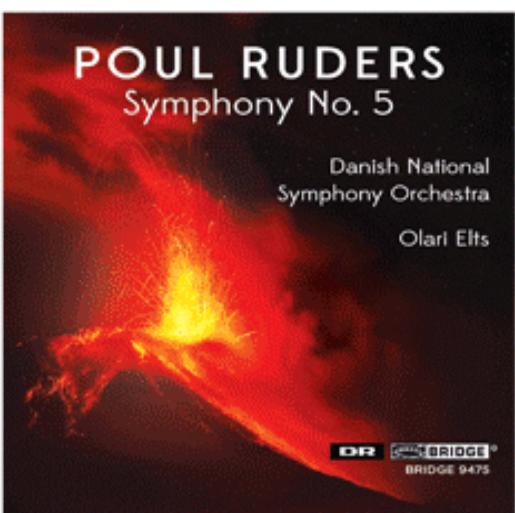
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The inaugural MCANA Award for Best New Opera has been given to composer Missy Mazzoli and librettist Royce Vavrek for *Breaking the Waves*, which received its world premiere on Sept. 22, 2016 by Opera Philadelphia in conjunction with Beth Morrison Projects. The award, created to honor musical and theatrical excellence, will be presented annually to a fully staged opera that received its first hearing in North America during the preceding calendar year. The award will be presented to the winners on July 19 during the opening of MCANA's annual meeting, held this year in Santa Fe, N.M.

To read the news article about the winners on *Classical Voice North America*, [click here](#). The other finalists were *Fellow Travelers* by composer Gregory Spears and librettist Greg Pierce, and *Anatomy Theater* by composer David Lang and librettist Mark Dion.

Nominations were made by MCANA members to the Award Committee, which selected the finalists and winners. The Awards Committee is co-chaired by Heidi Waleson, opera critic of *The Wall Street Journal*, and George Loomis, a longtime contributor to the *Financial Times*. The other committee members are Arthur Kaptainis, who writes for the *Montreal Gazette* and *Musical Toronto*, representing Canada; John Rockwell, former critic and arts editor of *The New York Times*; and Alex Ross, classical music critic of *The New Yorker*. For further information, please contact info@mcana.org

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