

BLOG | ASIAN HERITAGE

Cheng² Duo's 'Portrait': Bridging Cultures Through Music

Siblings Bryan Cheng and Silvie Cheng have been making music together for nearly their entire lives. With Bryan on the cello and Silvie on the piano, the duo officially debuted as **Cheng² Duo** in 2011 and have since made a global impact with their music. In a recent interview with The JUNOS, the duo discussed their JUNO-nominated album, *Portrait*, and the inspiration behind its inception.

The concept for *Portrait* emerged during the tumultuous year of 2020, amidst a surge of anti-Asian hate crimes in New York City during the pandemic. Silvie and Bryan, driven by a desire to counteract the fear and ignorance fueling these incidents, sought to use their music as a bridge to promote understanding and appreciation of Asian heritage. "We began to ask ourselves as artists, how could we contribute art – music in a way that would recognize that the core of some of this anger or hate or feelings of othering is just simply rooted in fear, and fear of the unknown," said Silvie.



They realized that their collection of commissioned works, spanning over a decade, could serve as a powerful medium to showcase the richness of Asian culture. "We felt that it was the perfect time, both for us and in the grand scheme of society, to release this music. For us, it's a personal fulfillment, reflecting our own identity in this musical project, and also a sense of pride to be able to share it with the world at large," shared Bryan.

Over the years, the duo has collaborated with numerous composers whose works have resonated deeply with them, making the curation of *Portrait* a natural extension of their artistic journey. Commissioned first and foremost for the quality and excellence of the compositions, the album features the work of composers of various Asian ancestries including JUNO-winners **Alexina Louie** and **Dinuk Wijeratne**.

"What is particularly unique about living in the world that we do is that we have people from so many mixed backgrounds and experiences. Historically, that hasn't been reflected in classical music, specifically," explained Bryan.

Portrait also features interpretations of traditional Chinese folk music, a deliberate choice to connect the past with contemporary musical expressions. Silvie and Bryan carefully selected beloved Chinese folk songs "Moon's Reflection upon a Spring (二泉映月 / Er Quan Ying Yue)" and "Racing Horses (赛马 / Sai Ma)" and reimagined them for piano and cello, instruments not typically associated with this genre of music. Using the source material as the foundation for their creative reinterpretation the two were able to draw out new sounds and infuse these traditional pieces with modern influence.



Performing these pieces for diverse audiences worldwide, from Switzerland to India, they witnessed the universal emotional responses these pieces elicited. "It doesn't actually matter that our album is featuring music of diverse Asian heritage," Silvie remarked. "All we wanted to portray with this album is that for us, we're tapping into those deepest feelings of tremendous sorrow or huge happiness. And we are bringing our own cultural background and experience and infusing that into the music."

With Silvie born in Tokyo and Bryan born in Ottawa, now residing in New York and Berlin respectively, the Cheng siblings' multicultural background deeply inspires their music. These culturally vibrant cities have enriched their artistic perspectives, encouraging them to embrace risk and explore new artistic territories and they hope their listeners feel the same.

"We're more open to what might seem different on the outside, but ultimately, you can find commonality with any other human, regardless of their cultural background. I do think that that is music's power to create a more understanding and ultimately, hopefully, united world," shared Silvie.

Listen to Cheng² Duo's album *Portrait* on streaming services now or purchase it directly from their **website**.

Feature image: Bryan Cheng & Silvie Cheng of Cheng² Duo at The 2024 JUNO Awards Red Carpet. Halifax, NS. Photo credit: Ryan Bolton

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