

I CARE IF YOU LISTEN



Cheng² Duo Explores the Intersection of Asian Identity and Western Classical Music on “Portrait”

FORREST HOWELL on January 4, 2024 at 6:00 am

Following three albums full of well-trod classical repertoire for cello and piano, [Cheng² Duo's](#) *Portrait* (2023, [Centrediscs](#)) is a refreshing collection of commissions and world premiere recordings that boldly embodies the sounds and symbolic coming together of multiple heritages. The commissioned composers – Dinuk Wijeratne, Vincent Ho, Alexina Louie, and Paul Wiancko – offer works that draw inspiration from their diverse Asian ancestry, as well as their training in Western classical composition. Throughout the album, siblings [Bryan](#) and [Silvie](#) Cheng persuasively portray Eastern instruments, sonic gestures, and musical imagery on their instruments, which are strongly rooted in Western European music traditions.

[Dinuk Wijeratne](#) based his *Portrait of an Imaginary Sibling* on the Scherzo from Beethoven's Cello Sonata No. 3; the whole piece unfolds in a Beethovenian manner, with the entire fabric of the composition tied up in its fundamental motifs. Wijeratne recasts the offbeat rhythm and ornamented melody of the Scherzo in a quick, dancelike groove, and Cheng² Duo presents the work with great authority, driving toward a dramatic conclusion. Unfortunately, the slow introduction is given a similar sense of forward feeling, losing the necessary contrast between sections and the suggestive mysticism that could have been achieved with a more improvisatory approach. Nevertheless, the duo's bold sound and unapologetically intense musical gestures create a compelling interpretation.



Cheng² Duo — Photo by Harald Hoffman

According to [Paul Wiancko](#), *Sonata No. 1 for Cello and Piano*, “*Shifting Baselines*” is his “love letter to the cello.” The work is a loose reflection on tonal elements from Beethoven's Cello Sonata No. 4 and is dominated by obsessive motivic repetition and an exploration of the piano's sonorities. Though demanding in execution and satisfying in terms of ensemble playing, some of the piece's points of arrival feel unearned, such as the end of the final movement when the opening material returns unaltered. The high-stakes energy in Cheng²'s performance gives the sonata a much-needed urgency, justifying the length of the work and its disparate sections.

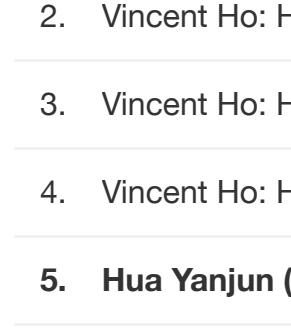
Horizon Images by [Vincent Ho](#) presents three distinctive musical vignettes inspired by prairie scenes, combining the imitative sounds of nature with expansive sonorities that evoke a feeling of openness. The preludial “Prairie Song” uses simple harmonies and compact melodic ideas to depict bird calls and nature sounds in a serene landscape. In contrast, the emotional weight of “Soleil différé” brings out a different side of Cheng²'s timbral palette; here, the duo's unflagging strength finally gives way to a certain whispiness that captures the fragility within Ho's writing. The piece concludes with an unusually brutal depiction of a windstorm, with tight, biting piano clusters setting the backdrop for erratic cello glissandi.

[Alexina Louie's](#) *Pond Mirrors Bright Sky* and *Wild Horse Running* have both been in the repertoire of Cheng² Duo for a decade now, and their familiarity with these pieces is evident in this recording. The seamless trading of cascading figures between cello and piano in *Pond Mirrors Bright Sky* mimics the sensation of seeing a reflection in the water and briefly questioning which image is real. As a contrast, *Wild Horse Running* showcases the duo's gestural playing, with short motifs embodying the characteristic strength and vigor of the Chinese zodiac horse, which serves as the basis for the piece.



Rounding out the album are two folk song arrangements by the duo, which, at first, seem a bit out of place next to the other contemporary works. Yet at the same time, the inclusion of “Er Quan Ying Ye” and “Racing Horses” helps to more fully realize the siblings' mission to explore Asian heritage in relation to Western classical music. Bryan Cheng demonstrates an impressive depth of musical maturity, using his cello to emulate sounds of the traditional Chinese erhu and, in doing so, shows how two distinct cultural traditions can exist harmoniously in a single instrument – and, symbolically, how they can also exist in a single person.

Portrait is a clear and satisfying response to the recent call to diversify the chamber music repertoire, and it does so without sacrificing quality for the sake of novelty. Additionally, the theme of Asian identity in classical music gives an added layer of personal meaning and impetus for the Chengs and the commissioned composers. If other young, accomplished ensembles were to ask themselves, “What is the most important thing we could contribute to the world of classical music in our present time?” I am almost certain they would reach a similar conclusion as Bryan and Silvie Cheng – new works performed with unmistakable excellence and conviction.



Portrait
by Cheng² Duo

buy

share

bc

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

10:40

03:20

05:34

03:18

00:00 / 07:37

05:55

04:39

06:40

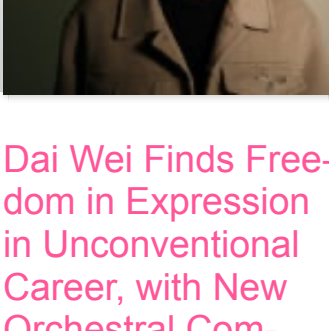
07:18

09:06

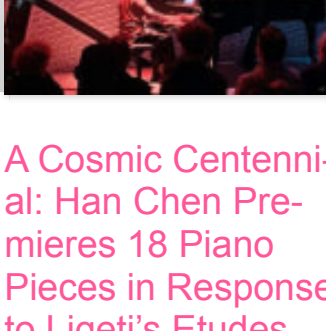
I CARE IF YOU LISTEN is an editorially-independent program of the *American Composers Forum*, funded with generous donor and institutional support. Opinions expressed are solely those of the author and may not represent the views of ICIYL or ACF.

A gift to ACF helps support the work of ICIYL. For more on ACF, visit the “[At ACF](#)” section or [composersforum.org](#).

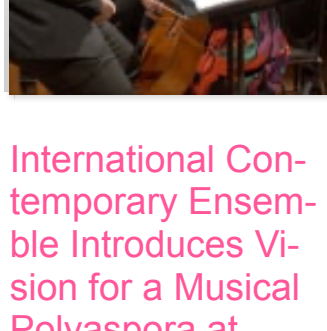
More on I CARE IF YOU LISTEN



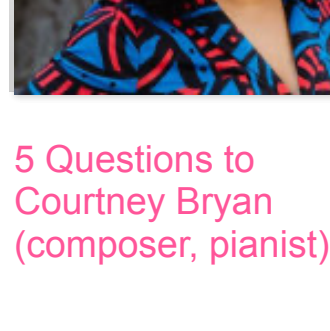
Dai Wei Finds Freedom in Expression in Unconventional Career, with New Orchestral Commission



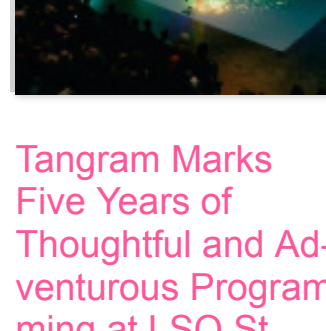
A Cosmic Centennial: Han Chen Premieres 18 Piano Pieces in Response to Ligeti's Etudes



International Contemporary Ensemble Introduces Vision for a Musical Polyspora at TIME:SPANS 2023



5 Questions to Courtney Bryan (composer, pianist)



Tangram Marks Five Years of Thoughtful and Adventurous Programming at LSO St Luke's

Powered by **C+ntextly**

FEATURED IMAGE CREDIT

PHOTO BY ANDREJ GRIGIC

CATEGORIES

ALBUM

TAGGED

ALEXINA LOUIE

BRYAN CHENG

CENTREDISCS

CHENG² DUO

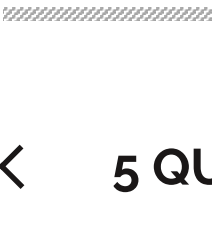
DINUK WIJERATNE

PAUL WIANCKO

SILVIE CHENG

VINCENT HO

1



FORREST HOWELL
Forrest (he/him) is a near-nomadic musician and writer who is curious about modern taste and aesthetics. He is currently an AmeriCorps volunteer in Denver.

PREVIOUS ARTICLE


5 QUESTIONS TO GITY RAZAZ (COMPOSER)

NEXT ARTICLE


50 YEARS AND 1,100 NEW WORKS IN, KRONOS QUARTET IS SHOWING NO SIGNS OF SLOWING DOWN

MOST POPULAR POSTS

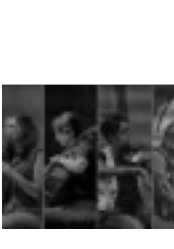
TODAYWEEKMONTHALL




EARNED, NOT LEARNED: HOW CLASSICAL MUSIC NOTATION IS NOT BUILT FOR NEURODIVERGENT STUDENTS




5 QUESTIONS TO KWAME RYAN (CONDUCTOR)



IT'S NOT JUST AN ACCESS PROBLEM – ORCHESTRAS AREN'T CREATING SAFE ENVIRONMENTS FOR BLACK MUSICIANS



OLEA CENTERS WOMEN AND BLACK COMPOSERS IN A CONCERT OF AMERICAN FOLK-INSPIRED MUSIC



OUT OF CONTEXT #4: THE MUDDY OWNERSHIP OF DREADLOCKS

NEVER MISS AN ARTICLE...

Sign up for our newsletter and get a weekly round-up of I CARE IF YOU LISTEN content delivered straight to your inbox every Friday.

Email

First Name

Last Name


By submitting this form, you are consenting to receive marketing emails from: American Composers Forum, 75 West 5th Street, Suite 522, Saint Paul, MN, 55102, US, <http://www.composersforum.org>. You can revoke your consent to receive emails at any time by using the [SafeUnsubscribe®](#) link, found at the bottom of every email. [Emails are serviced by Constant Contact.](#)

Sign up!


ADVERTISE


with us!

THANK YOU TO OUR LEADERSHIP FUNDERS!

The Rubin Institute for Music Criticism

Ann and Gordon Getty Foundation

SFCM

WALDER FOUNDATION

ABOUT US

I CARE IF YOU LISTEN is an [award-winning media platform](#) for living music creators.

I CARE IF YOU LISTEN is a program of American Composers Forum, made possible thanks to generous donor and institutional support. You can support the work of ICIYL with [a gift to ACF](#).

CATEGORIES

ACF ARTIST FEATURE

ALBUM

ANNOUNCEMENT

ART

ARTICLE

AT ACF

BOOK

CONCERT

EDUCATION

ENTREPRENEURSHIP

ESSAY

FEATURE

FRENCH COMPOSERS

INTERVIEW

NEWS

OPINION

PLAYLIST

PODL

RECOMMENDED CONCERTS

SLIDESHOW

TECHNOLOGY

VIDEO


MORE LINKS


About Us

Privacy Policy

Advertise

CONNECT WITH US





Privacy - Terms