

Silvie and Bryan Cheng celebrate Canada with original music, multimedia



PETER HUM, OTTAWA CITIZEN

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Bryan and Silvie Cheng, who play a Canada 150-themed concert on June 23/17, for story by Peter Hum, © photo by Uwe Arens UWE ARENS

Pianist Silvie Cheng and her younger, cello-playing brother Bryan, face a big obstacle these days when it comes to sharing the stage as they did when they were growing up in Ottawa.

Silvie, 26, lives in New York City and Bryan, 19, studies music in Berlin. But the duo will overcome the 4,000 kilometres that usually separates them to return to their hometown next week to give a concert that they call An Elemental Expedition. The concert at the National Gallery of Canada's auditorium is part of the Music and Beyond festival, even if that event begins in full on July 4 and runs until July 17.

Below, Silvie and Bryan discuss why they've designed this concert of originally commissioned music to celebrate Canada and attract younger listeners to classical music with its multimedia component.

Q: Before we talk about your concert, please give me an update on what each of you are doing these days.

Bryan: I live in Berlin, Germany, where I attend the University of the Arts. I'm in my second year there. Despite living relatively far away, I do fly back across the pond at least once a month for recitals and tours. It's a pretty crazy life, but I have no complaints. There is never a dull moment, and I always find everything I do very rewarding and refreshing. I also treat this lifestyle as a sort of conditioning for the years to come. Based on our future schedule, the travelling will only get more intense. Luckily, I'm one of those people who can rest their head anywhere and fall fast asleep, which comes in handy for lengthy journeys.

While in Berlin, I engage in a variety of activities similar to those who major in music in other parts of the world: private lessons, studio classes, recitals, theory lessons, piano, chamber music, orchestra, as well as interdisciplinary courses (all of this in German, of course). When I'm not practicing or at school, I do my best to soak myself in the cultural mecca that is Berlin. There is always something going on — this vibrancy being one of the reasons I love the city — yet sometimes one has to make some difficult choices, for example, watching Sir Simon Rattle and the Berlin Phil, or Daniel Barenboim and the Staatskapelle...how do you choose?!

Aside from playing with Silvie in our duo, I also particularly enjoy working with orchestras as a soloist. In fact, I'll be touring with the National Youth Orchestra of Canada across the country this summer, performing the Shostakovich Cello Concerto No. 1, which kicks off at the NAC's Southam Hall on Saturday, July 22 at 7:30 p.m. (tickets are free this year, available at the NAC box office). I'll also be making my debut with the Niagara Symphony in 2018, which I'm very much looking forward to!

Silvie: I am based in New York City, where my time is balanced between performing as both a soloist and chamber musician, and teaching both in-person and over the web. When I am not on the road with Bryan, I am the pianist of the New York-based trio sTem (voice, clarinet, piano), which specializes in contemporary music and collaborations with living composers. We recently had a week-long residency at Cornell University, recording and premiering new works by the PhD composers there.

I am also able to explore my other passion of nurturing the next generation of musicians and music-lovers through my work as a teaching-artist of both the Manhattan School of Music's Distance Learning Program and the Bridge Arts Ensemble. With BAE, I have the pleasure of performing concerts, providing coaching and lessons, and leading workshops for K-12 students throughout the Adirondack region. At MSM, I use advanced videoconference technology to give weekly lessons to high school students around the world, from Alaska to England to Nebraska. When I am not working or travelling, I try to make time to go to museums, gallery openings, plays, jazz shows, etc. You can see that I am constantly interacting with other artistically driven people, and this diverse range of experiences week-to-week keeps me curious, refreshed, and inspired!

Q: How frequently do you get to perform together?

Silvie: Despite living on different continents, we actually see each other every few weeks. This year began with a performance at Carnegie Hall, and we have been in Vancouver, Montreal, Vermont, Belgium, Germany, and of course, Ottawa, since then. In early 2018, we'll have the luxury of touring together for eight weeks straight, across British Columbia, Ontario, Quebec, and throughout the U.S. We are extremely fortunate to be able to make music together, and it has definitely been one of the strongest bonds of our personal relationship, besides our shared love of great food.

Q: What does it mean for you to make music together, both privately and in performances for listeners?

Silvie: There is something very comforting about being both backstage and onstage with your best friend. For listeners, we have often received feedback that the concert experience feels familial and warm, as if we are all in a living room together, and that they enjoy our "telepathic" communication, feeling as if we breathe as one.

Q: Let me be the devil's advocate and say that classical music is on its last legs as its listeners grow old. What do you say to that?

Bryan: Probably the most often-heard phrase in regard to the future of classical music is that "Classical music is dying." This is simply not true. Audiences of classical concerts may be aging, but mortality doesn't apply to an art form, music included.

Another misconception is that classical music is elitist and one must be of a certain social status or age or maturity to understand this music. One of the greatest joys for me, when I'm performing on stage, is seeing someone my own age, or even younger, in the audience and enjoying themselves. Just like good food (whether it is French cuisine or a juicy bacon cheeseburger), good music is for, and can be appreciated by, everyone.

As artists, we must simply ensure that the way we communicate our art form is relatable within our time. For a while, we have experimented with different concert formats that make the music we play more accessible to all audiences, whether by speaking about the background of the pieces, creating programmes that mix great masterwork sonatas with shorter and more stylistically-varied works, or delving into multimedia. The positive feedback we received from these concerts encouraged us to keep pushing the boundaries and inspired us to think even bigger.

This Canada 150 project is not at all denouncing traditional classical music, the music that we first fell in love with, and will continue to love for the rest of our lives. In the meantime, we also wish for others of our generation to be able to appreciate its beauty. An Elemental Expedition is a chance for people who might not necessarily choose to see a concert otherwise, to experience concerts in a more relatable setting, which will hopefully inspire them to seek out the treasures that classical music offers. Likewise, traditional concertgoers can also be given the opportunity to enjoy a different concert experience and expand their palates.

Q: Why and how does your upcoming concert combine multimedia with music?

Silvie: Having been exposed to painting since childhood, I cannot help but relate music with other art forms. The relationship between visual and aural senses has not only helped my own imagination when I play, but I hope has also affected listeners.

One of my favourite pastimes is reading memoirs and biographies of composers whose music we are programming, and what I enjoyed reading about most was the way that artists of all kinds had very close interactions with each other in the 18th and 19th centuries especially. In Parisian and Viennese salons, composers, writers, painters, actors and sculptors would all congregate on a daily basis to share ideas and engage in discussion, and this would eventually organically lead to artistic eras like Impressionism. In contrast, we saw how these communities were becoming more compartmentalized today, with museums hardly ever playing music, the element of theatre all but removed from the concert stage, and the audiences for each art form becoming more specialized rather than shared.

We believe that the arts must evolve with the times. Looking back, the way music is experienced has changed tremendously. I still remember listening to cassette tapes in the car as a young child (which my parents had collected when they were university students), then CDs, then on a Walkman. Today, the majority of new music is either experienced digitally on small devices or as music videos — with a visual component. For many of our generation and younger, the visual aspect is almost seen as a necessary counterpart to the aural, adding another dimension and enhancing the overall artistic experience.

Because of all of this, in recent years we were inspired to create multi-sensory concert experiences involving cross-pollination of the arts. In the past few years, we experimented with creating our own multimedia content for themed concerts, for example, pairing paintings of Marie Antoinette with French baroque music, Monet with Debussy, Tchaikovsky with ballet, Piazzolla with tango, etc.

When it came time to think about commemorating Canada's 150th, we wanted to create an opportunity to collaborate with other amazing Canadian artists, to inspire each other to produce something truly memorable. We couldn't be more thrilled to have a remarkable group of Canadian composers on board and to premiere their new works: Carmen Braden of Northwest Territories; Derek Charke of Nova Scotia; Vincent Ho of Alberta; Jordan Pal of Ontario; and Rodney Sharman of British Columbia. In addition, the fantastic video production studio Normal (based in Montreal) is our main multimedia partner, and we are excited to be able to integrate the artwork of incredible Canadian artists, such as photographer Edward Burtynsky, media artist Pascal Grandmaison, and masterworks from the National Gallery of Canada's collection.



What do you hope that a listener will experience from taking in An Elemental Expedition?

Bryan: Recently, I have been asking myself a lot of questions about the concert-going experience and about the purpose of music, partly because sometimes I leave live performances feeling unaffected. What do you want to feel when you walk out of a concert? What is the difference between a good concert and a great one? What do we want the audience to feel, to bring home with them? What journey do we want to take concertgoers on, because every performance, concert, and recital is a journey in a way? We want to be able to answer these questions with each concert we present.

When audiences walk out the door after one of our recitals, and this one in particular, we want them to have felt that they were transported or affected in one way or another. Whenever we embark on a project, we always make sure that we ourselves are passionate about it — for this Canada 150 one, we have given our all, and we are absolutely thrilled to present a fresh concert experience in a duo format with the highest quality music and art this country has to offer. It's hard to describe the scope of An Elemental Expedition, which has been in the making for almost two years — you just have to come see it!

Q: Why did you choose the theme of Canada's regions for this work?

Silvie: Like many Canadians, our background is quite international. I was born in Tokyo, and moved to Ottawa as an infant with my parents of Chinese heritage. I now live in New York City. Bryan was born in Ottawa and now lives in Berlin. Yet the farther we are from our hometown, the more affection we have for this country. We are proud Canadians wherever we go. Growing up, we always loved travelling, and Canada's diversity of landscape holds such a unique place in the world that we wanted to highlight this in this project. There is such a broad range of climate and environment, from the mountains of the West to the tundra of the North to the fields of the Prairies to the currents of the Atlantic, which inspires a vast output of art.

When we initially approached the composers involved in this project, we asked them to feel totally free (including from any instrumental limitations) in exploring how living in any one of these specific regions influenced and inspired the way they think, hear, and write music. As a result, you will hear music that, although quite challenging to play, is not only some of the most beautiful and evocative new music written today, but also truly inspired by Canada itself.

Our hope is to bring this project to audiences around the world in the years to come. Compared to a large ensemble, the feasibility of bringing such a project and promoting this amazing country on tour is much higher.

We, as a nation, have so much to share with the rest of the world, yet we don't often take the limelight. It's about time to let the world know that we are not only polite people, but also highly creative in all art forms; we are not just a snowy country, but one with its own immense beauty and diversity. The idea of natural elements (water, wind, fire, etc.) in this project is something that people of any background and culture can relate to. At the heart of this project is a shared human experience that happens to be created by Canadians, but can be seen as taking place anywhere in the world.

Q: As you're spending more time outside of Ottawa and Canada, do you have any new reflections on what it means to be Canadian?

Silvie: Although the classic stereotype of being nice and too apologetic does hold true, what I think is deep-rooted in the Canadian mentality is a natural understanding of others and acceptance of differences. Almost all of us come from some kind of immigrant background, even if generations back, so we share the experience of having varied origins but calling Canada home. What makes us different is not only appreciated but celebrated; rather than dividing us, it unites us. We're also a nation made up of caring, passionate, and generous people — speaking of generosity, we have received support from so many individuals, patrons, organizations, and institutions across the country for this project, for which we are eternally grateful!

Bryan: Being one of the very few Canadians — and even North Americans — at my university, I can say that I have a lot of experience with other peoples' reflections on what Canadians are like! From my own perspective, however, I see more and more that we Canadians seem to be a placating force, tending towards grace and courtesy in most situations rather than meeting conflicts, and we have a good balance between being light-hearted and taking things seriously. Most importantly, we respect all human beings. Nowadays, more than ever, it's as if we are the glue that holds everything together. And I believe music is another layer of glue that holds human spirits together.

Silvie and Bryan Cheng

An Elemental Expedition

Music and Beyond festival

When: Friday, June 23, 7 p.m.

Where: National Gallery of Canada Auditorium

Admission: included in a festival pass, or \$30 (\$20 for students) at musicandbeyond.ca

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