

Cheng² Duo's most personal album yet shines spotlight on composers of Asian ancestry

Bryan and Silvie Cheng will launch their new album Monday night at the National Arts Centre's Fourth Stage.

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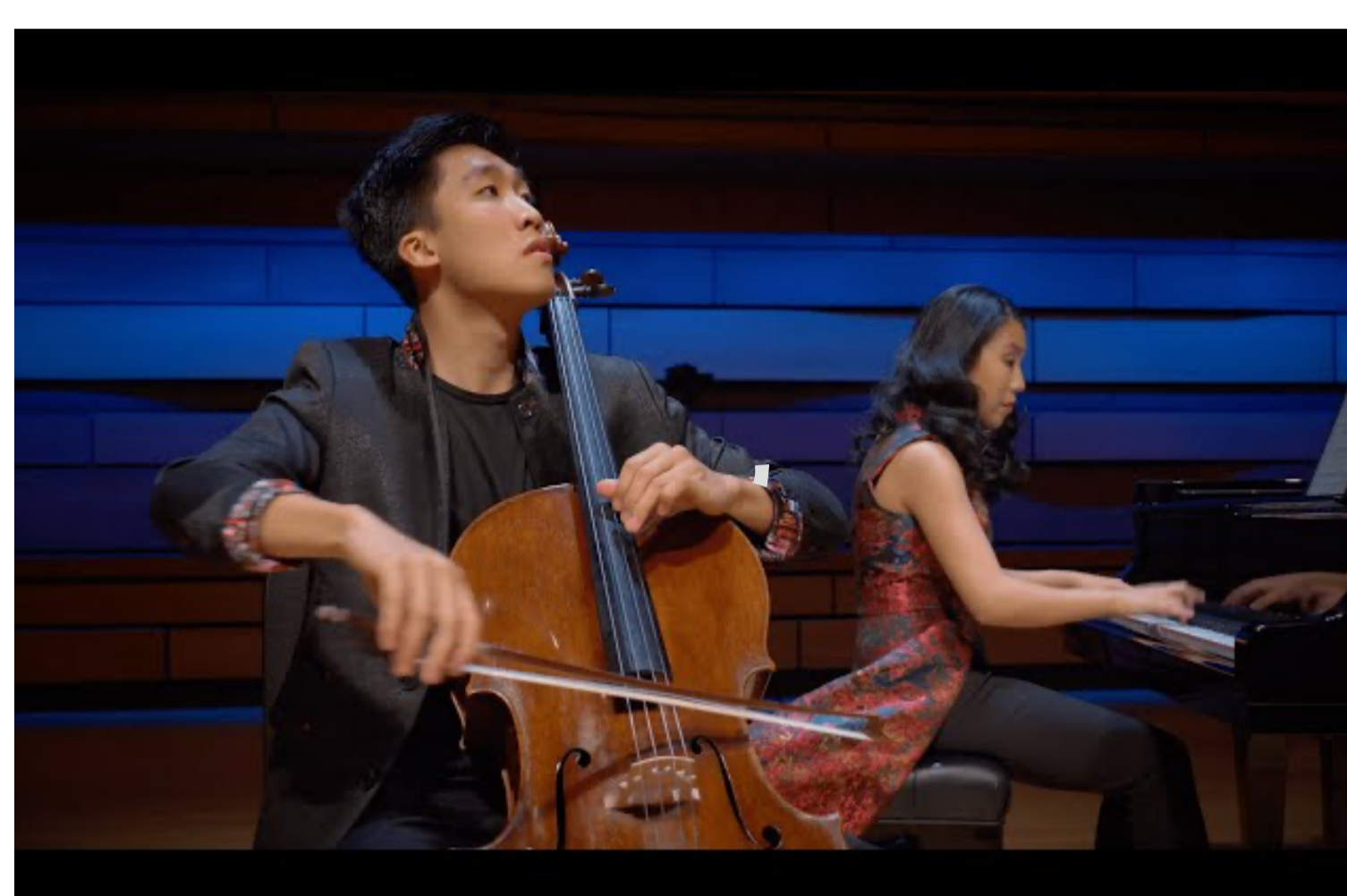


Silvie Cheng, a pianist, and her younger brother Bryan Cheng, a cellist, launch their new album at the National Arts Centre next week. PHOTO BY ANDREJ GRILC /Supplied

When the Ottawa-raised siblings and classical musicians Bryan and Silvie Cheng toured China in 2016, they wanted to play a piece that audiences would be likely to know.



Bryan, a cellist, and his older sister Silvie, a pianist, made an arrangement for themselves of a Chinese folk song, widely played for decades on the erhu, the Chinese two-stringed fiddle. They gave their version of the Chinese piece Sai Ma, the English title Racing Horses.



"You play the first couple of measures and everyone recognizes it, but they've never heard it on cello and piano, or in a concert setting," Silvie Cheng says.

But more recently, that piece in the hands of the Chengs found an unlikely new resonance, far from its native land.

In late July this year, when the duo was finishing its concert in the opera house in Cheboygan, Michigan (population 5,000, give or take), someone, to their great surprise, clamoured to hear their rendition of the Chinese folk song.

"It's become a signature encore," Silvie says.

The piece is one of six on the Chengs' new recording, Portrait, which they will launch Monday night at the National Arts Centre's Fourth Stage.

A decade in the making, Portrait is the fourth and most personal record yet from the former prodigies, who are aged 32 and 26, respectively, thanks to its focus on material rooted in a diverse notion of Asian heritage.

In addition to arrangements of two Chinese folk songs, Portrait includes works that the Chengs have commissioned over the years from the Canadian composers Alexina Louie and Vincent Ho, American composer Paul Wiancko and Ottawa-based composer and University of Ottawa assistant professor Dinuk Wijeratne — all musicians of various Asian ancestries.

With their three previous recordings on the German music label audite, the award-winning musicians trained their sights on music from countries and composers in the great classical music canon.

Their 2016 debut recording Violoncelle Français included music by Debussy, Fauré, Franck, and Saint-Saëns and its 2018 follow-up, Violonchelo del Fuego, embraced Spanish solo and duo works. In 2019, the Chengs released a two-CD album, Russian Legends, filled with their performances of music by Prokofiev, Shostakovich and Scriabin, among others.

In comparison, Portrait's mandate to present works by living composers of Asian ancestry is "our way of illuminating a spotlight on these voices," says Bryan Cheng. "These are composers whose music we really believe in, and we feel their pieces should be heard more widely."



The Chengs say they are passionate about commissioning new compositions as a way of contributing to classical music's repertoire, so that hopefully its canon doesn't stagnate.

"People always talk about how do we make classical music relevant today, how to make it grow and evolve?" says Silvie Cheng. "We're discovering the Beethovens and Brahms of our time, in the hopes that 200 or 300 years from now, these people's music will become part of the standard classical music canon."

Soon after the COVID-19 pandemic began, when the siblings were in lockdown in New York City, they had new reasons to reflect on their Asian ancestry.

"There was an increase in violence and hate crimes against Asian-Americans," says Silvie, who lives in New York City, and whom Berlin-based Bryan was visiting when the pandemic started. "We sort of thought: Is there a way for us to contribute more understanding and awareness of our culture?"

"We looked back on our identity as musicians and asked, 'What could we put out into the world...that could be meaningful, that could also relate to people in our current climate?'"

At the same time, the Chengs' latest program means to build a bridge between material with Asian connections and non-Asian listeners, such as their fan in Cheboygan, Michigan.

"We are trying to focus on the universality of this music," Bryan Cheng says. "You don't need to know the background of the pieces or of the composers... to feel something, to feel connected."

For the folk songs, Bryan and Silvie researched how folk instruments were authentically played, so that the musical tradition behind them could inform their playing.

"We tried to emulate those sounds as much as possible," says Bryan. He says he watched hundreds of hours of YouTube videos about playing the erhu and sarangi, a bowed, short-necked three-stringed instrument played in traditional music from South Asia.

"It's really interesting for us to delve into these worlds that we don't explore," he says.

While the contemporary commissions were composed by people of Asian descent, the material is not constrained stylistically because of who wrote them.

"You can probably hear some Asian influences if you really listen carefully, but also influences of jazz and pop and rock," Bryan says. "It's really music that represents the diversity of today, all of the things that various people listen to. Most of the composers are players themselves, in contact with world music, with folk music, jazz ... consciously or subconsciously, these seep into their own musical language."

"Each work we present lives in its own sound world," he says. "I hope that people discover them with curiosity and with appreciation."

Cheng² Duo album launch

When: Monday, Oct. 30, 7:30 p.m.
Where: National Arts Centre, Fourth Stage (1 Elgin St.)
Tickets: \$25 at nac-cna.ca

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