

Review

Cleveland Classical Guitar Society — Beijing Guitar Duo at Plymouth (Jan. 25)

by James Flood



Despite Saturday's prodigious snow, a decent-sized crowd braved hazardous road conditions to greet the Beijing Guitar Duo for their Cleveland appearance. As the snow swirled outside Plymouth Church UCC, the duo warmed the audience with an engaging performance.

Duo members Meng Su and Yameng Wang opened the program with transcriptions of four Domenico Scarlatti harpsichord sonatas. The Beijing Guitar Duo's warm, gentle, yet full-bodied tone brought an ease and naturalness throughout the four works. In the opening *K.173, L. 447 in G*

minor, their keen sense of phrasing gave the piece an undulating quality. In the second and fourth sonatas of the set (*K. 45, L. 265 in D Major, K.151, L. 422 in D minor*) Su and Wang established their status as virtuosi with exceptionally fast and effortless scales which moved simultaneously, executed in perfect lockstep between the two.

Eight Memories in Watercolor, Op. 1, is an impressionistic work by Chinese composer Tan Dun transcribed from its original piano version. Such a work as *Watercolors* relies on sonority and careful use of dynamics and timing in order to create mood and imagery. The Beijing Guitar Duo works from a fairly narrow color palette, but does so effectively. Likewise, they successfully used sensitive timing and dynamics to effect a meditative and ethereal feel.

The concluding work of the first half was a solo performance by Yameng Wang of 19th century guitar composer Giulio Regondi's *Reverie, Op. 19*. Wang's graceful style was on display as she effected lovely phrasing amidst sweeping arpeggios. There were a few occasional "buzzes," but they did little to dim the enchantment. The *Reverie* features an extended arpeggio section which returns again toward the end of the work. Wang's tremolo was magical — extremely even, clean, and as smooth as silk. Underneath the tremolo, the supporting harmonic voices demand that the player negotiate sometimes awkward shifts and left hand formations while simultaneously shaping the melody in the tremolo line. It was no problem for Wang, who shaped the tremolo as gracefully as though she were only managing a single line melody on the guitar.

After the intermission it was Meng Su's turn as she performed Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco's *Rondo, Op. 129*. Both Wang and Meng are students of guitar virtuoso Manuel Barrueco. In Su's solo one could hear the influence of Barrueco's sense of solidity, strength and attentiveness to musical detail. Su's tone was rounded, strong, and robust, and she interpreted on a very detailed level a piece whose tempo doesn't allow a lot of time for such detail. Of special note were her fast arpeggios which were exceptionally tight. Overall she exhibited complete control with minimal effort.

The Beijing Guitar Duo has a tone that is unswervingly tasteful and warm. Their attack is consistently clean and precise without a trace of any "nail noise." Likewise, they understand the proper use of vibrato on the instrument, never using it gratuitously, but consistently employing it to give necessary body to notes on the guitar. All these attributes were in full force in the *Valse Poeticos*, a transcription of a piano work comprising eight short movements by Enrique Granados. In this alluring Spanish work the two players sometimes alternated taking the melody line, one playing a phrase while the other picked up the succeeding phrase. This was a charming feature which intuitively what crooners of yesteryear knew for years: that when performing a duet, closely alternating solo lines within a song heightens the engagement of its audience.

The closing work was by a composer who has become a signature program closer for the guitar, Astor Piazzolla. Piazzolla's *Tango Suite* provided a fitting conclusion to a concert that combined passion, pizzazz, and bravura. In the opening *Allegro* the Beijing Guitar Duo once again exhibited their ability to play fast scales in perfect sync with one another and again they alternated solo lines. In the *Andante* their shaping of melodies was simply beautiful. In the final movement, *Allegro Vivace*, they pulled all the stops. The *Allegro Vivace* gradually turned into an unrelenting, dizzying carousel of strumming, rhythmic guitar slapping, and blazing scales, all in perfect time with one another. The audience came to its feet at the work's conclusion. The duo responded by giving a rousing encore of Manuel De Falla's *Danza Espanola*.

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