

Cleveland Classical Guitar Society: a conversation with Xuefei Yang

by Jeremy Reynolds



“In China, I was the very first guitarist to enter a conservatory,” said Xuefei Yang. “Now some people call me a pioneer because, looking back, it was a very brave thing to do, even though I didn’t really realize it at the time.” On Saturday, March 25, Yang will play on the Cleveland Classical Guitar Society’s International Series at Plymouth Church UCC in Shaker Heights at 7:30 pm. Her program features music by Bach, Paganini, Changjun, and Brazilian composers including Villa-Lobos.

Yang, who has performed in Cleveland twice before, began studying classical guitar shortly after the Cultural Revolution’s ban on Western music was lifted. She is the first Chinese guitarist to have launched an international career and has performed in more than 50 countries.

Before the concert begins, artist Guangsheng “Jerry” Wang will demonstrate traditional Chinese painting techniques. Wang is also a musician — he taught the *erhu* (a traditional Chinese violin) at the Tianjin Conservatory of Music for more than 25 years. His paintings will be available for purchase at the concert.

“This is a great pairing,” Yang said in a Skype interview. “In Chinese culture, painting and music are very closely related. In ancient times the intellectuals were supposed to know four things: calligraphy, painting, chess, and how to play an instrument.”

Yang will open the concert with Bach’s Lute Suite, BWV 995, which will be followed by Paganini’s Grand Sonata and Changjun’s *Sword Dance*. Originally composed for a four-stringed Chinese instrument that resembles a small lute, *Sword Dance* is inspired by a poem by Du Fu, whom she referred to as “the Chinese Shakespeare.” The poem is about a famous dancer, and the music imitates the quick, virtuosic movements of its

subject. Yang transcribed the piece for guitar. “In making a transcription, I always enjoy studying an original score very closely, and through this process I get to know the music very well,” she said.

The second half will be devoted entirely to Brazilian music with works by Villa-Lobos, Jobim, Reis, and Garoto. Last year, Yang released *Colours of Brazil*, which includes some of the music she’ll be performing in Cleveland. She said that she loves that repertoire. “It’s true, the guitar has a huge repertoire by Spanish composers and can really be thought of as a Spanish instrument,” she said. “But I feel that it’s almost the same situation in Brazil. The guitar has always played a big role in the development of Brazilian music.”

Yang said she picked up the guitar at the age of seven because her parents wanted her to learn an instrument. There happened to be a beginning guitar group at her school, and she fell in love with the sound. None of the major conservatories in China had a guitar program at the time, so Yang gave up her offer at one of the best music schools in Beijing to attend a smaller school where she could study guitar. She said it was expensive for her parents and there was no guarantee of qualifying for a degree, but in the end she was able to earn her bachelor’s. Later she was awarded a scholarship to attend the Royal Academy of Music in London, where she now lives. “I have been very fortunate in my career,” Yang said.

Yang says she enjoys presenting music from different cultures around the world to showcase the versatility of her instrument. “I love providing that contrast in my recitals. Sometimes it is difficult to switch between styles, but when I’m putting the different pieces together, I make sure that I’m comfortable and that it has a nice flow for the listeners.”

Tickets for the March 25 performance are \$25, with \$20 seats available for students and seniors. On Thursday, March 23 at 7:00 pm, Yang will present a masterclass at John Carroll University that is free and open to the public.

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