

## Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival: a conversation with Xuefei Yang

by Mike Telin



When given her choice, guitarist Xuefei Yang likes to present programs that represent a variety of musical styles. “The guitar is such a diverse instrument, and I think of myself as a diverse player as well,” Yang said via Skype from her home in the U.K.

On Friday, June 7 at 7:30 in Mixon Hall at CIM, [Xuefei Yang](#) will present a program that ranges from traditional Chinese music to 21st-century works. The concert is presented as part of the 2019 [Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival](#).

Yang said that for her concert programs she usually only includes one or two traditional Chinese pieces, but Friday’s concert will be different. “I’ve recently made some new

transcriptions for the 70th anniversary of the People’s Republic of China, so half of this program will be Chinese.”

Her program will also highlight the connection between Chinese and Spanish music, a subject she began to research for her 2008 recording *40 Degrees North*. “When I started this project ten years ago, I discovered a link between Madrid and Beijing,” she said. “Both are the capitals of their countries and they are both on the 40th Parallel. But musically I think there are some links too.” Yang noted that Spanish guitar music is heavily influenced by the rhythmic language of Flamenco, and that the Chinese [pipa](#) shares the same ancestors as the guitar. “The music is similar as well and I thought that was quite interesting.”

Yang said that she likes to combine the old with the new and the familiar with lesser-known works. “*Moonlight over Spring River* is one of the most classic traditional pieces from the Ming Dynasty, and Chen Yi’s *Shuo Chang* was composed in 2013.” Other Chinese works on the program are the traditional *Fisherman’s Song at Eventide* as well as Liu Mao’s *Yao Dance*, and Xu Changjun’s *Sword Dance* — all three arranged by Yang.

The program will open with Debussy’s *La Fille aux Cheveux de Lin*. “It is a prelude so hopefully it will work there, but I think Debussy was a composer who could have written something very nice for the guitar. Although he is not Spanish, he did influence many Spanish composers such as de Falla, Albéniz, and Rodrigo.”

Fittingly, Yang will follow the Debussy with de Falla’s *Homenaje ‘Pour le tombeau de Claude Debussy’* — the only piece he wrote for the guitar — and the “Miller’s Dance” from *The Three-Cornered Hat*. “De Falla influenced Rodrigo so I’ll play his *Invocación y Danza (Homenaje a Manuel de Falla)*,” she said. Other familiar Spanish classics include Albéniz’s *Tango in D* and *Seville*, and Granados’ *La Maja de Goya* and *Zapateado*.

Yang noted that because Flamenco is such a big part of the Spanish guitar tradition, it’s always nice to include it on a program. “I’m not a Flamenco player, but there are some pieces that I am comfortable performing.” Those include Niño Ricardo’s *Zambra Mora*, Paco de Lucía’s *Reflejo de Luna*, and Paco Peña’s *Colombiana*.

The link between the cities of Beijing and Madrid also extends to Yang’s own career — she was the first guitarist to enter a music school in China, and also the first to become internationally recognized as a performer.

Yang’s first public appearance was at the age of ten, and she received such acclaim that the Spanish Ambassador to China presented her with a concert guitar. Her Madrid debut at the age of fourteen was attended by Joaquín Rodrigo and John Williams — after hearing her, Williams donated two of his own instruments to Beijing’s Central Conservatoire.

“When I look back, I feel that I have traveled an incredible path,” she said, “but at the beginning I couldn’t imagine the career that I now have. To say that I am a pioneer is easy and it all sounds quite fancy, but it’s not an easy path. Before me, there wasn’t anybody in China who had been down this path — there was no one for me to follow.”

Yang added that developing a career requires a combination of passion, determination, and a little bit of luck. “I didn’t expect that [Joaquín Rodrigo and John Williams] would turn up at my concert.”

I asked Yang how she first came to the guitar. “That was fate. I didn’t know what a guitar was. My parents thought I should play the accordion because it was a popular instrument, but as it happened, there was a guitar group in my primary school and my parents knew the teacher so they put me in the group even though I was actually underage. So I always say that the guitar chose me, I didn’t choose the guitar.”

In addition to her performing career, Xuefei Yang serves as the artistic director of the Changsha International Guitar Festival in China. “One of the first artists I invited was Jason Vieaux,” she said. “Being an artistic director is a very different feeling from being a performer, but when you see the audience enjoying a concert, the rewarding feelings are the same as being onstage.”

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