

## Cleveland Classical Guitar Society to present Beijing Guitar Duo

by Mike Telin



If you're looking for something special to share with your significant other for Valentine's Day, why not take in a classical guitar concert? On Saturday, February 15 at 7:30 pm at Plymouth Church, the [Beijing Guitar Duo](#) — Meng Su and Yameng Wang — will return to the Cleveland Classical Guitar Society stage with a program of music by J.S. Bach, Debussy, Tan Dun, Chen Yi, and

Piazzolla. Buy your tickets in advance [here](#).

“We're looking forward to being back in Cleveland,” Meng Su said by telephone from Knoxville, Tennessee, the sixth stop on their month-long, twelve-city tour. I began our conversation by asking her about their eclectic program.

*Mike Telin: You and Yameng are getting down to business from the beginning with Bach's “Chaconne.”*

Meng Su: Yes. This arrangement is after the Busoni arrangement for piano — he added a lot of harmonies and made it more Romantic, but kept the essence of Bach's writing. The arrangement we're playing is by the German guitarist Ulrich Stracke. It works very well. We've been playing it for many years. The “Chaconne” is such a big task but as you get older you begin to understand it more. Now that Yameng has become a mother — she has a two-month old daughter — and I have started teaching in Hong Kong at the Academy for the Performing Arts, I think we have a deeper understanding of it. I'm sure we will be playing it for the rest of our lives.

*MT: The program will continue with your arrangement of a piece I love: Debussy's Petite Suite.*

MS: It's a beautiful piece — I fell in love with it from the first time I heard it. I heard so many colors and the sounds of nature in it that I thought, 'we've got to play it,' but one guitar is not enough. It's originally for piano four-hands, and we have four hands too. I think the arrangement works magically and we've had wonderful feedback from audiences saying that they especially like all the colors the two guitars can produce.

*MT: Another work that was originally for piano is Tan Dun's Eight Memories in Watercolor. This two-guitar arrangement is by your and Yameng's teacher Manuel Barrueco. The duo performed the entire piece the last time you were in Cleveland. For this concert, you'll be playing four movements, 'Missing Moon,' 'Staccato Blues,' 'Blue Nun,' and 'Sunrain.'*

MS: The reason we've brought it back is that the work is Tan Dun's Opus 1, and it's inspired by the Debussy. It's also a nice companion to the Chen Yi that follows. We thought it would make a good connection to put the three pieces together.

Tan Dun wrote the piece in the 1970s when he was a freshman at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing. He was homesick and missing the songs from his childhood. The piece has folk-song elements from Hunan but he wrote it using Western compositional techniques in the style of Debussy.

Chen Yi's *Nian Hua* is a Chamber Music America commission that she composed for us in 2016. It's influenced by the Chinese New Year's Paintings — traditionally you would draw pictures on paper and paste them to your walls or windows to wish for a good New Year. It's a three-movement piece with a percussive sound along with some Chinese folk tunes.

*MT: The program will conclude with another fun piece, Piazzolla's Tango Suite.*

MS: We wanted to show that the guitar is very popular in many cultures and countries and it is *very* popular in Argentina. It's the only piece that Piazzolla wrote for two guitars, and I think it's a masterpiece.

*MT: The last time you were in Cleveland you told me that more and more, children were learning to play the guitar and the number of professional guitar concerts in China was increasing: has that trend continued?*

MS: Yes, the classical guitar continues to bring more people to the concert halls, and even more young children are starting to play the instrument. It's very different from even ten years ago. There are a lot of summer guitar festivals in China that are popular with families and aficionados of the instrument. And more Chinese students are going to the U.S. like we did, or to Europe to study.

*MT: Why do you think the guitar has caught on?*

MS: There are multiple reasons. It is a beautiful instrument that is more affordable and more portable compared to the piano. The teachers have done a fantastic job of bringing the guitar to the children and letting them study and giving them access to music.

*MT: Turning to your job as a teacher: are you enjoying it, and what have you learned from your students?*

MS: I really like teaching. When I was younger everything came very naturally to me — I never thought about how the fingers move up and down the fingerboard. I love the connection between our minds and our fingers, and how the mind controls the fingers. You usually see it the opposite way — the fingers do their job and the mind is behind it. But if your mind is ahead of the fingers it makes a huge difference. I'm fascinated by things like that.

*MT: What has always struck me about the Duo's playing is how the two of you sound like one person playing a single guitar.*

MS: I like to tell the story that my father has OCD when it comes to cleaning. He likes everything to be clean, but I never got that. My room was always a mess and he would clean up for me. But as I got older I think he rubbed off on me. Now, I like the sound of my guitar to be really clean, with no buzzes. We try to sound like one guitar, like one person with one mind — that's our ultimate goal.

I find that I have to tell my student ensemble when their endings are not together that you have to care about your sound. We don't want an ugly sound, we want a pure, perfect togetherness. The solutions are there, you just have to want it — which is simple to say but not easy to achieve.

*MT: I hope that your family has not been affected by the Coronavirus?*

MS: This is a tragedy to humankind. My family is in Qingdao and they are okay, but they just stay home and don't go out. I won't be able to go back to China until probably May,

and my teaching in Hong Kong is postponed until April, so I am teaching online — sending videos back and forth — to keep things going.

But I think in difficult times like this, music is a great way to find an oasis in life — that's what my experiences are and that's what I tell my students. I tell them to focus on what you are doing, and despite what is going on around you, which you can't change, you can change yourself. Just work on your music and make yourself a better player.

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