

Cleveland Classical Guitar Society: Duo Chinoiserie performs music inspired by folklore

by Mike Telin



When classical guitarist Hu Bin was earning his doctorate at the University of Arizona, he crossed paths with Xia Jing, a visiting scholar from China who played the [guzheng](#).

As Bin recalled during a recent Zoom conversation, “We were having a guitar competition and my professor, Tom Patterson, invited her to perform a piece after one of the sessions so people could enjoy some music while the jury made their decisions. The first time I heard Jing play it was wonderful. Actually, it was the highlight of the day.”

On Saturday, April 26 at 7:30 pm at the Maltz Performing Arts Center, the Cleveland Classical Guitar Society will present Duo Chinoiserie, Bin Hu, guitar, and Jing Xia, guzheng. Their Cleveland debut program features music inspired by ancient folklore and legends. Tickets are available [online](#).

Bin said that although the guitar and the guzheng are both plucked instruments he was originally skeptical that the two could play Western classical music together. “I thought the guzheng is a Chinese instrument, it must be something folkloric — it cannot play Mozart or Beethoven. But the first piece we tried was the ‘Ritual Fire Dance’ by Manuel de Falla and it worked really well. So that’s how we started.”

During that same Zoom session Jing said that she began playing the 2,500 year-old instrument when she was four. “My parents loved music, but in their generation they didn’t have the opportunity to play any instruments. So my grandpa’s friend, who is a local teacher, started giving me lessons.”

At the age of twelve, Zing moved to Beijing to continue her studies at the China Conservatory of Music. “There was a moment when I really missed my family,” she said. “I was very young and alone in a new place, so I think the guzheng really grounded me and provided me with good company. But when I came to the U.S. the connection between the instrument and me just got stronger and stronger.”

Growing up in Tianjin, China, Bin remembers hearing his father playing the guitar. “I was captivated by the sound. He was not a professional, but he learned how to play the guitar in college. One day I asked him to teach me how to play. We started with very easy songs. Eventually I outgrew his ability, so he found me a teacher in my city when I was around ten years old.”

Their program will begin with Olga Amelkina-Vera’s *Dreaming of Lions*, composed for the Duo. The work was inspired by the 32,000 year-old paintings from the Chauvet Cave in Southern France. “There are paintings of all kinds of animals on the cave wall,” Bin said. “The lions caught people’s attention because when you look at it, you wouldn’t believe that it was painted by a human being so long ago.”

Stephen Goss’s *Cantigas de Santiago* is based on the medieval music associated with the ancient pilgrimage to the shrine of St. James in the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. “It was written for David Russell,” Bin said. “Before Jing and I got married we walked the Camino in 2016. After that, we decided to make our own arrangement of the piece.”

The program’s first half will conclude with Sergio Assad’s Latin Grammy-winning composition *Tahhiyya li ossoulina* (“The Song of the Ancestor.”)

“*Inari* was written by my Japanese friend Yusuke Nakanishi. Inari is one of the gods in Japan — the god of agriculture. So every year there are different festivities celebrating Inari,” Bin said.

The first movement, “Invocation,” describes a festival where people are sending prayers to Inari for a good harvest. “The second movement, ‘Fox’s Dance,’ is funny because the fox is considered a close spirit to Inari. So the fox starts to dance to confuse people.” The third movement, “Festival,” is a celebration of the bountiful Harvest.

Following Manuel de Falla’s *Tombeau de Claude Debussy*, and four selections from *El amor brujo*, the program concludes with two pieces by French multi-instrumentalist Mathias Duplessy.

“He has a unique group called The Violins Of The World. We approached him to write something for us because he’s really interested in world music and he had the idea of writing a piece based on a Chinese legend of Zhong Kui.”

Bin explained that Zhong Kui was an intelligent guy with a disfigured appearance, who spent his life studying in order to pass a very difficult exam to become a governor. “He was selected to be interviewed by the emperor, which was a big thing in ancient China. It means that no matter what, you will have a good career as a bureaucrat.”

During the interview the Emperor was frightened by Zhong Kui’s appearance and didn't offer him a position. “Zhong Kui was humiliated because he was judged by his appearance, so he took his life in front of the emperor. That’s why the first movement is called *Zhong Kui's Regrets*.”

Bin said that today Zhong Kui is a popular tale in China and many people hang photos of him on their houses to scare away ghosts. “According to the legend, Zhong Kui died and now travels around the world hunting demons. That’s why the second movement is called *Zhong Kui’s Journey*.”

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