

## Chinese Musicians Association of North America inspire at CMA (Apr. 11)

by Peter Feher



The Chinese Musicians Association of North America (CMA-NA) may be less than a year old, but some of the group's repertoire — and many of these performers' instruments — date back centuries.

This history was on dazzling display in the Cleveland Museum of Art's Gartner Auditorium on Friday, April 11. The

evening covered thousands of years of culture, from ancient plucked melodies that might have been heard in the third, fourth, or fifth centuries BCE, to a world-premiere chamber work that imaginatively bridged Eastern and Western classical traditions.

Photos of sculptures and paintings from the Museum's Chinese art collection, similarly extensive in scope, were projected above the stage.

Cleveland Orchestra violinist Zhan Shu was the chief architect of the concert, connecting CMA-NA — for which he serves as treasurer — with Northeast Ohio. He acted as intermediary, not only by showcasing his colleagues who hail from across the U.S. and Canada, but also by contributing an illuminating performance himself.

Joining pianist and fellow Cleveland-based CMA-NA member Shuai Wang, Shu dug into Fritz Kreisler's 1910 violin showpiece *Tambourin Chinois*. There was substance to this short work that's more often programmed as just pure spectacle. Approaching the pyrotechnics of his part with a highly percussive attack, Shu laid bare how the virtuosity cultivated on a few strings and a bit of wood is something shared across civilizations.

This was the theme of Friday's first half, which, after an introductory drum solo by Cleveland Institute of Music percussion student Jacob Chang, put the spotlight on three traditional Chinese instruments that can thrill with technique alone. Of course, each

performer went for maximum feeling as well — another universal truth in music is that skill is simply the conduit for expression.

First up was Jing Xia, who tackled the centuries-old tune *Lofty Mountains and Flowing Water* on *guzheng*, a many-stringed zither that's played horizontally. Here it achieved the effect of a harp, Xia summoning swirling glissandos in her right hand to evoke the motion of a river.

Next, we witnessed Cathy Yang pour out her heart performing *Moon Reflected in the Second Spring*, a composition by the 20th-century folk musician Abing. Yang's every embellished note on *erhu*, sometimes referred to as the Chinese two-stringed violin, sounded like a soulful cry.

Following Shu's solo turn, *pipa* virtuoso Jin Yang presented an arrangement of contemporary composer Danhong Wang's *The Yearnings of Cloud and Flower*, accompanied by — of all things — the Gartner Auditorium organ. Impressively, Yang held her own on a plucked, four-stringed lute (albeit a mic'd one), against the blast produced by Wenchun Jiang at the pedals and keyboard.

Several large ensembles took the stage after intermission, including the East-meets-West combination of *guzheng*, *erhu*, *pipa*, violin, and piano for the premiere of Wang Lu's *On What Planet*. The sustaining instruments reinforced the piano's left hand while the plucked instruments decorated the right, the balance altogether otherworldly.

Bamboo flutist Eric Liu was the star of Jiang Ying's *Dunhuang*, its traditional sounds coming to the fore in this piece as well as in the evening's encore, Wang Lu's *Iberian Fantasy*.

But for sheer theatricality, nothing could beat *Ambush From All Sides*, a classical Chinese composition that, in this arrangement, featured Yang on *pipa* convening, confronting, and spurring on ten young members of the Flying Strings Youth Ensemble, who were stationed up and down the aisles. She would pluck a single note, which would then be answered in a ricochet around the audience. Call it complete immersion.

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