

Cleveland Classical Guitar Society: Duo Chinoiserie (Apr. 26)

by Kevin McLaughlin



Sometimes a concert surprises and disorients its audience so completely that you have to be reminded of what you signed up to hear. Duo Chinoiserie, pairing guitarist Bin Hu and *guzheng* virtuoso Jing Xia, had that effect on Saturday evening, April 26, at the Maltz Performing Arts Center.

Presented by Cleveland Classical Guitar Society, the duo's program of works — some written and others arranged for them — traced an imaginative arc across centuries, continents, and traditions, in a marvelous comingling of sonic possibilities.

Xia fully realized the timbral and technical potential of her instrument — a five-foot Chinese plucked zither — graciously, precisely, and, truth be told, theatrically. In what sometimes seemed like a ceremony, with graceful hands and often bowing her head low over the soundboard, she pulled magic from that enormous object. When she sat up again, we could see the face of an artist fully engaged, as if communing with ancient advisors.

For his part, guitarist Bin Hu demonstrated keen sensitivity and technical mastery as a consistent producer of beads of lovely sound, both complementary of and in distinction to those of his partner.

Dreaming of Lions by Olga Amelkina-Vera, commissioned and premiered by the duo in 2024, provided Hu and Xia with an early vehicle to establish their rapport and show the compatibility of the two instruments. The guitar and *guzheng* traded evocative melodic

lines and shimmering textures — especially Xia’s liquid tremolos and Hu’s sensitively shaded guitar work.

Selections from Stephen Goss’s *Cantigas de Santiago* followed, offering a mix of medieval melodies and contemporary harmonies. Like the duo, Goss likes to blend disparate traditions and respect for times and places. Hu’s phrasing here was especially supple, allowing the ancient tunes to emerge from the plectral bustle in music that sounded both familiar and strange.

Sérgio Assad’s *Tahhiyya li ossoulina* brought the first half to an exciting close. Rhythmically intricate and seasoned with Arabian spices, the piece highlighted Hu’s technical command while Xia’s deft ornamentations and timbre evoked journeys eastward.

After intermission, the duo appeared in Asian dress, not just as a theatrical touch but to substantiate the theme of the second half — “legends from different cultures.” Inspired by Japanese folklore, Yusuke Nakanishi’s *Inari* was a colorful depiction in two movements, the first called “Fox” and the second, “Festivals.” Hu’s glistening harmonics and Xia’s expressive slides and bends combined into a Zen soundscape.

Hu then played Manuel de Falla’s *Tombeau de Claude Debussy* for solo guitar, capturing both its Spanish melancholy and delicate French lyricism. His playing was marked by clarity, impeccable voicing, and ample romantic warmth.

The duo went on to explore several excerpts from Manuel de Falla’s *El amor brujo*, rendered in striking colors and showing spectacular finger work. Here, the *guzheng*’s characteristic, twangy resonance brought a surprising, yet fitting, earthiness to the Spanish melodies, and Hu’s rhythmic precision supplied infectious energy.

Infused with drama and folkloric urgency, Mathias Duplessy’s eclectic *Zhong Kui's Regrets* and *Zhong Kui's Journey*, provided a thrilling finale. The grim tale, which Hu described in his introductory remarks (spoiler alert: the protagonist doesn’t come to a good end) motivated the duo to unleash their full expressive powers.

They drummed on their soundboards, made whistling and sliding sounds on their strings, and even shouted (“hey!”). Xia’s virtuosic glissandi and Hu’s dynamic precision created intense, memorable, and darkly thrilling moments. These are musical episodes that Duo Chinoiserie are either fated to play or are uniquely suited for.

Throughout the evening, Hu and Xia showed that not only are they an extremely well-allied musical team, but also the parents of two cute girls stationed in the front row,

who were a delightful and enthusiastically applauding part of the act. As the last notes faded, the audience rose to join them in an ovation, a fitting tribute to a performance as extraordinary as it was satisfying.

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