

Hao Yang and Helen Zhibing Huang celebrate Chinese culture at the Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival (June 5)

by Stephanie Manning



The opportunity to hear rare repertoire is exciting enough. But hearing it performed so beautifully made the evening of June 5 truly special.

As part of the Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival, guitarist Hao Yang and soprano Helen Zhibing Huang presented a lovingly curated program that blended their Chinese heritage and Western musical training. At the centerpiece was a collection of songs set to Chinese poetry — providing a look into this

gorgeous repertoire.

Both performers grew up in China before coming to study in the U.S., and each spoke about their personal connection to this program. “We’re so grateful we get to connect to our culture through this beautiful music,” Huang told the audience in the Cleveland Institute of Music’s Mixon Hall.

The world premiere of Daixuan Ai’s *Jiangnan* (江南), commissioned by Yang and named for the southeastern region of China, embodied this sense of bittersweet melancholy, a love and a longing for a home that is far away. And the text of Zhao Jiping’s wistful *Quiet Night Thought* (静夜思) made this connection more specific. Poet Li Bai’s last line translates to: “Bowing my head, I am thinking of home.”

The guitarist provided a steady supporting anchor for the soprano, whose tone and diction felt effortlessly clear. Qing Zhu’s *I Live at the Source of the Yangtze River* (我住在江头) revealed Huang’s operatic training as she moved into her highest range. The vocalist is also a charismatic actress — she was all smiles during lively selections like Huang Zi’s *Plum Blossoms in the Snow* (踏雪寻梅) and Stephen Goss’ “She Threw Me a Quince” from *The Book of Songs*.

Goss' work began a section of pieces with English texts taken from translated Chinese poetry. Benjamin Britten's "Dance Song" from *Songs from the Chinese* stood out, thanks to Huang's theatrical descending glissandos on the word "Alas!" But these and the other translated selections felt wordy in comparison to the concise, syllabic Chinese.

Huang described the traditional Spanish number "Reinas de la Baraja" as a song with "a lot of sass and fire," and as promised, her delivery was full of personality. But as the wordless vowel sections of Heitor Villa Lobos' "Ária" from *Bachianas brasileiras No. 5* made clear, the duo didn't need words to get their emotions across.

Of course, Yang needed no words in the opening section of solo guitar repertoire. Jonathan Leathwood's arrangements of Romantic pieces by Brahms ("Der Tod, das ist die kühle Nacht") and Mendelssohn (Canzonetta from *String Quartet No. 1*) came across as moody yet beautiful — like the overcast sky visible through Mixon Hall's tall glass windows.

The audience was reverentially quiet during Lennox Berkeley's *Sonatina* as Yang deftly kept her dynamics to a whisper. Then, Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco's *Capriccio diabolico: Omaggio a Paganini* pulled the curtain back on her technical prowess. Despite the devilish title, every scale and flourish sounded assured in her hands.

Yang and Huang bade the audience goodbye with John P. Ordway's *Farewell* (送别), a bittersweet 19th-century American tune that eventually gained Chinese lyrics and became quite popular in its new country. Both musicians sang it as schoolchildren. "Whether you know this tune or not, we hope it will bring a piece of your own childhood back to you," Huang said.

"In life, it's rare to have moments of joyous gathering," reads one line of the English translation. Indeed, those special occasions don't happen every day — but this concert certainly qualified.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com June 18, 2025.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)