

Resonance Project rings in the Lunar New Year with “Qin and Strings” (Feb. 7)

by Stephanie Manning



Gazing at Chinese paintings in the *shan shui* (山水) style, whose artists use ink and a brush to create beautiful landscapes, you might notice two patterns. First, any people depicted are often dwarfed by the enormous scenery. Second, the painters don't need to cover every inch of canvas — sometimes they let the blank space do the talking.

This appreciation of nature and the use of space influenced Irwin Shung and his piece *Seven Chinese Characters*, as the pianist and composer explained at the Resonance Project concert on February 7. That work opened the evening's program, “Qin and

Strings,” presented at Forest Hill Church in Cleveland Heights. The group timed this celebration of Chinese music to the upcoming Lunar New Year celebrations.

Using the projector screen on the side of the stage, Shung clicked through a carousel of images to give historical and cultural context to the program — a fusion of performance and pre-concert talk that worked very smoothly. Eventually he sat down at the piano to perform *Seven Chinese Characters*, a flowing and meditative journey that also draws inspiration from Li Bai's poem “Quiet Night Thought” and a traditional melody called “Jasmine.”

Shung divided the work into two parts and seven sections, although where one ended and the next began became harder to distinguish as it went on. Like a gradually cresting wave, the intensity peaks around the midpoint before returning to stillness. Bolstered by the venue's generous acoustic, he let the notes ring, as if painting with the reverberation.

Violinist Ann Yu then joined Shung for a three-piece set of works by Chun Yi, Tan Dun, and Ma Sicong. Sicong's *Dragon Lantern Dance*, which directly pays homage to New Year celebrations, was by far the most joyous of the trio. Yu's full-bodied tone and pizzicatos elevated the somber “Sorrow in the Desert,” from Tan Dun's *Hero Sonata*.

In Chen Yi's quaint *Romance of Hsiao and Ch'in*, the violin and piano embodied two traditional instruments — the bamboo flute and the seven-stringed zither. The hall definitely rewarded the contemplative spaces within the music. Although Shung played the audience some audio of what the xiao and qin sound like, hearing a piece by the instruments in person could definitely have elevated the experience.

After intermission came the famous *Butterfly Lovers' Violin Concerto* by He Zhanhao and Chen Gang. Shung discussed the piece in depth, describing not only its historical context, but also how the piece was personally important to his grandmother and his family.

The music follows the famous folk tale of two tragic lovers, combining the pentatonic scale and other East Asian elements with Western harmonies and sonata form. Coordination between the two players briefly faltered as the tempo picked up, but both were clearly engaged by the music.. Yu spun out the recognizable melody and its development, while Shung emphasized the low, menacing piano strikes that signal the obstacles standing in the lovers' way.

After the music ended, the celebrations were far from over, as a generous banquet organized by QinYing Tan — Shung's wife and co-artistic director of the Resonance Project — waited down the hallway. Among the spread, steamed buns, rice crackers, and cucumber salad lay next to chocolate chip cookies and a personalized cake.

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