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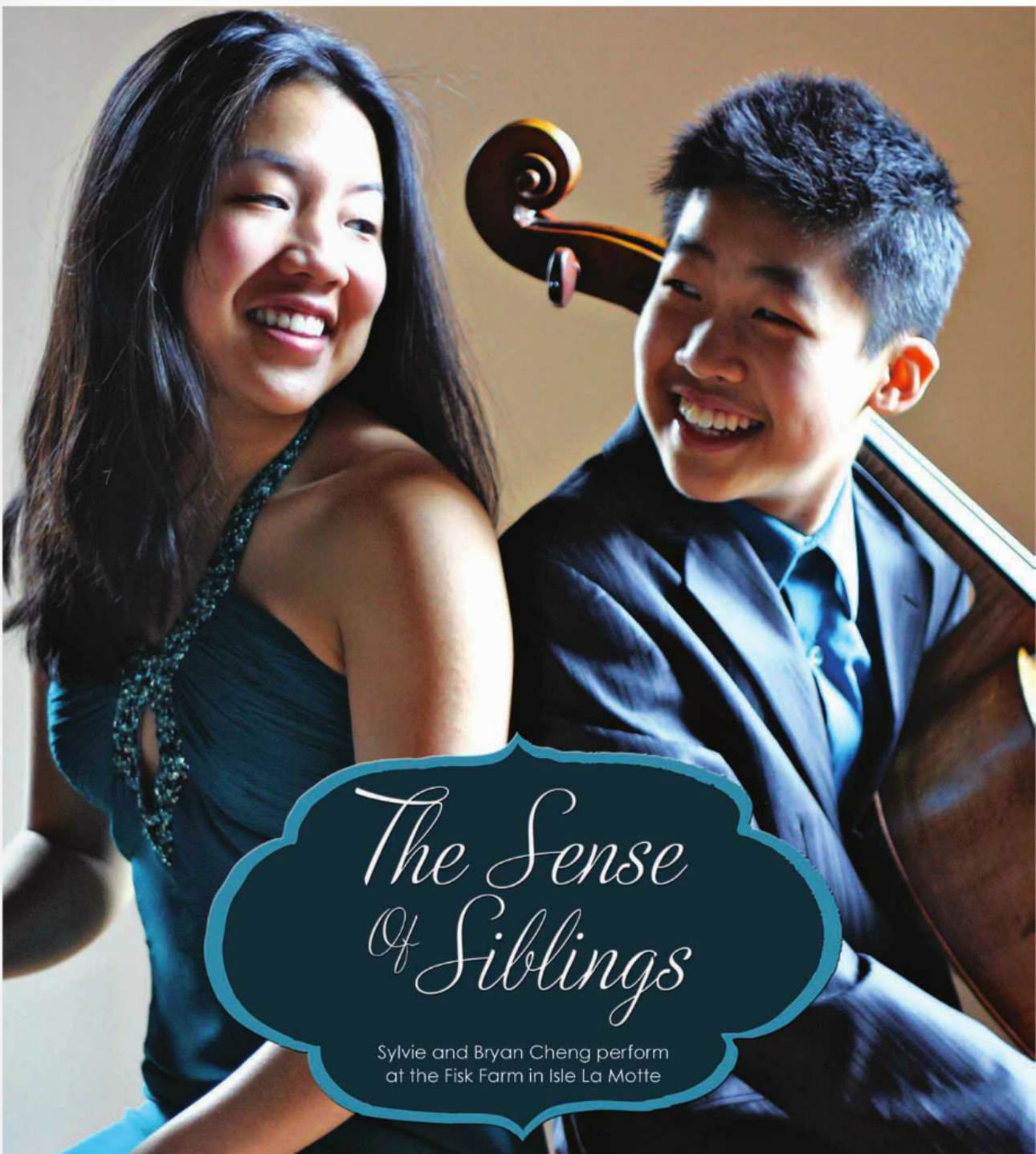
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The Sense of Siblings
Sylvie and Bryan Cheng perform at the Fisk Farm in Isle La Motte

The Sense Of Siblings

Sylvie and Bryan Cheng perform June 18
at the Fisk Farm in Isle La Motte.

By Benjamin Pomerance



MAYBE YOU CAN CALL IT A HAPPY ACCIDENT. Consider this test of parenting: a four-and-a-half-year-old girl in the backseat of a car on a long road trip to Canada's Maritime Provinces. A mother and a father, each of them yearning for tranquility, place Himalaya-sized peaks of toys and games on every side of their daughter. As the miles churn past, virtually every divertissement eventually wears out its welcome. There's only one exception: a small, blue electronic keyboard. The child returns to that item daily.

Her parents aren't musicians. Still, they notice the trend. Raised during the state-programmed rigidity of China's so-called Cultural Revolution, they're determined to offer their child the freedom of exploration that they never enjoyed. Perhaps this explains why, when their trip is over, the mother asks the daughter if she wants to take piano lessons. The daughter thinks for a couple moments. Then she offers a noncommittal "Okay" and a shrug.

A few years later, she's practicing that instrument practically every day. Her parents buy her a grand piano, something for her to use when she's not out figure skating or

painting or playing competitive soccer. They also provide her with a ready-made audience member: a younger brother. Whenever she practices, he appears. While she plays, he dances and claps his hands. The implications are obvious: He wants to join in. The parents look at that grand piano in their home and recommend that the boy learn how to play it, too.

But he has other ideas. Sure — he wants to play music like his sister. Yet he doesn't want to play music the same as his sister. So his mother takes him to hear a violinist perform. That isn't right, either. The sound is too high and squeaky, and he runs out of the room. Then she brings him to hear a cellist play — and suddenly, everything clicks. The tone, in his own words, is "deep and scary," and he loves it. At age three-and-a-half, his parents allow him to take his first lesson.

Now, advance the film to today. Sylvie Cheng has just received her Master's degree from the Manhattan School of Music. Bryan Cheng is on the verge of traveling to Berlin to begin his undergraduate musical studies. Both

of them maintain international schedules of concert engagements. Both already possess substantial stashes of individual accolades. And together, under the billing of the Cheng2 ("Cheng squared") Duo, they've played across three continents, extensive artistic travels that will bring them to the Fisk Farm in Isle La Motte, Vt., on July 18.

So perhaps it would be easy to simply say that the accident worked out, that the coincidences all were for the best. Yet to do so would ignore something greater, a force that draws far deeper than happenstance. Between these two siblings rests a bond that neither of them can fully explain. Still, they are aware of its presence. It's a connection that simultaneously fed their artistry and grew stronger because of it. And both of them agree that it's been there since the beginning.

Before, even. Sylvie spent plenty of time pining for a sibling prior to Bryan's birth. On every occasion when her parents gave her a penny to throw into a fountain, she

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made that same wish. Whenever her parents asked what she wished for, she would readily tell them, hoping that it would come true.

And when it did come true, and when Bryan quickly joined his sister on the byways of musical pursuits, their artistry became part of their search for daily amusements. "Playing music together was natural from the start," Sylvie remembers. "It was just like playing games or jumping on the trampoline together — literally 'playing' music."

Like the players of any game, both of them strove to figure out the art form's nuances. In the process, they learned plenty about each other's creative preferences and tendencies. That's why, when Bryan began seeking a pianist to perform with him, all of those seasoned pros honestly never had a chance.

"According to my parents, after Bryan took up the cello in 2001 as part of the Suzuki music program in Ottawa, he had about two or three public performances with other hired

a program that included the world premiere of a piece that Sylvie and Bryan commissioned from award-winning Canadian composer Alexina Louie. They appeared at a wide range of festivals, including Italy's Trasimeno Music Festival, Ottawa's International Chamber Music Festival, and the Festival of the Sound in Parry Sound, Ontario. On Canada Day in 2014, they performed at the Canadian Ambassador to the European Union's residence in Brussels, Belgium, making music for an audience of diplomats from around the world.

And as those experiences evolved, so did something else. "During rehearsals, we found that in the past, we had to explain ourselves and make gestures to signal the entrances of our parts in the music." Bryan explains, "Nowadays, we have our own little language with minuscule gestures that only we can pick up to tell when we're starting or if we need to take time, and we don't need to really talk too much to express our ideas. We just know what the other person is thinking or feeling. Some people have mistaken it for being a telepathic connection."



pianists,” Silvie states. “One day, his teacher saw us play together. Very soon after, I became [Bryan’s] designated pianist, and it has stayed that way ever since.”

A decade later, they officially adopted the “Cheng2” label, developing this name for their 2011 debut in Carnegie Hall’s Weill Recital Hall. By that time, they had already established burgeoning reputations in Canada and the United States, appearing in multiple venues both as soloists and as chamber musicians. Yet it was that first collaborative Weill Recital Hall performance that truly drew attention to their musical interplay with one another. Their offerings before a sold-out house garnered high praise in *New York Concert Review*, with particular attention paid to the “thoughtfulness and generosity” both siblings exuded from the stage.

To Bryan and Silvie, however, the reviewer’s comment only confirmed something that they already sensed. “One of the most frequent comments we receive from audience members is how much they enjoy seeing us smile onstage,” Silvie says. “[It’s] something that we can’t help since we truly do feel so happy and grateful to not only be able to share beautiful music with audiences, but also to be able to share the special onstage time together. Some of my most treasured memories of concerts are with Bryan by my side.”

In the past four years, those memories have arrived in abundance. The duo returned to Weill Recital Hall in 2013 to perform before another packed crowd, presenting

It isn’t telepathy. Instead, it appears to represent the growth of that original spirit of play, that initial sense of delight from trying out new things — musical and otherwise — together. “Outside of music, I think spending time together when jogging, going to the gym, or visiting museums, for example, has brought us closer as siblings and as people,” Bryan states. “And I think our bond will only become stronger.” More than once during the interview, they refer to one another as best friends.

For the best friends, the concert series at Fisk Farm provided a particularly affirming memory. Two summers ago, the siblings spent the day after their performance at the farm exploring the area. During that day, they went for a hike on the trails around the farm. When they returned, they found a note on their car. The writer was an inspired attendee from the previous day’s concert, asking the musicians to come back again — making this year’s program of works by César Franck, François Francœur, and Gabriel Fauré something of a command performance.

“We didn’t have a chance to meet everyone at the [last Fisk Farm] concert,” Bryan says, “but I know that we, as a duo, aim to provide emotional nourishment through music, and it is also nourishing for ourselves when we feel the connection with our audiences. For us, music is truly a universal language without any borders. No matter what your background and life experience is, good music can enrich lives.”



Now, the duo will soon discover how music will affect the next chapters in their lives. Silvie is entering her first year as a full-time New York City-based performing and teaching artist. Bryan is entering his first year living overseas as a university student. Standing on two of a musician's most challenging crossroads, facing decisions to make and lessons to learn, the pianist and the cellist have plenty of individual choices to make about their paths ahead.

Yet giving up the duo isn't one of them. According to Silvie and Bryan, that option isn't even on the table. No matter how far removed they become geographically, and no matter how saturated their schedules become artistically, they intend to sustain this earliest of partnerships. In fact, they seem to be looking forward to facing the obstacles of limited practice together, of learning both parts to a piano-cello duet so well that they can hear the sound of the other musician playing even before their first rehearsal.

"For the past few years, with one of us based in New York and another in Canada, we've already had some pieces where we

rehearse for the first time and feel like we've been playing the piece for much longer," Bryan says. "We're very lucky in that sense, that we've been playing together for so long. It's such a great feeling to be playing with someone who understands you completely and who you can trust."

Maybe it was luck, a chain reaction initiated by a simple parental attempt to preserve peace on a long car ride. Or maybe it is something which, like a truly great musical performance, is impossible to define in words. Some of the elements are discernable: trust, commitment, friendship, subtle communication, a spirit of play. Yet in the end, it appears richer than all of these traits and then some, an indelible sense that just seems to exist between these siblings and the music they've shared from the start.

The Cheng2 Duo performs on June 18 at 7:30 p.m. in the barn at Fisk Farm in Isle La Motte, Vermont. Area listeners can also hear the duo perform on July 17 at noon on Vermont Public Radio. For concert tickets and more information, call (802) 928-3364 or visit www.fiskfarm.com.