

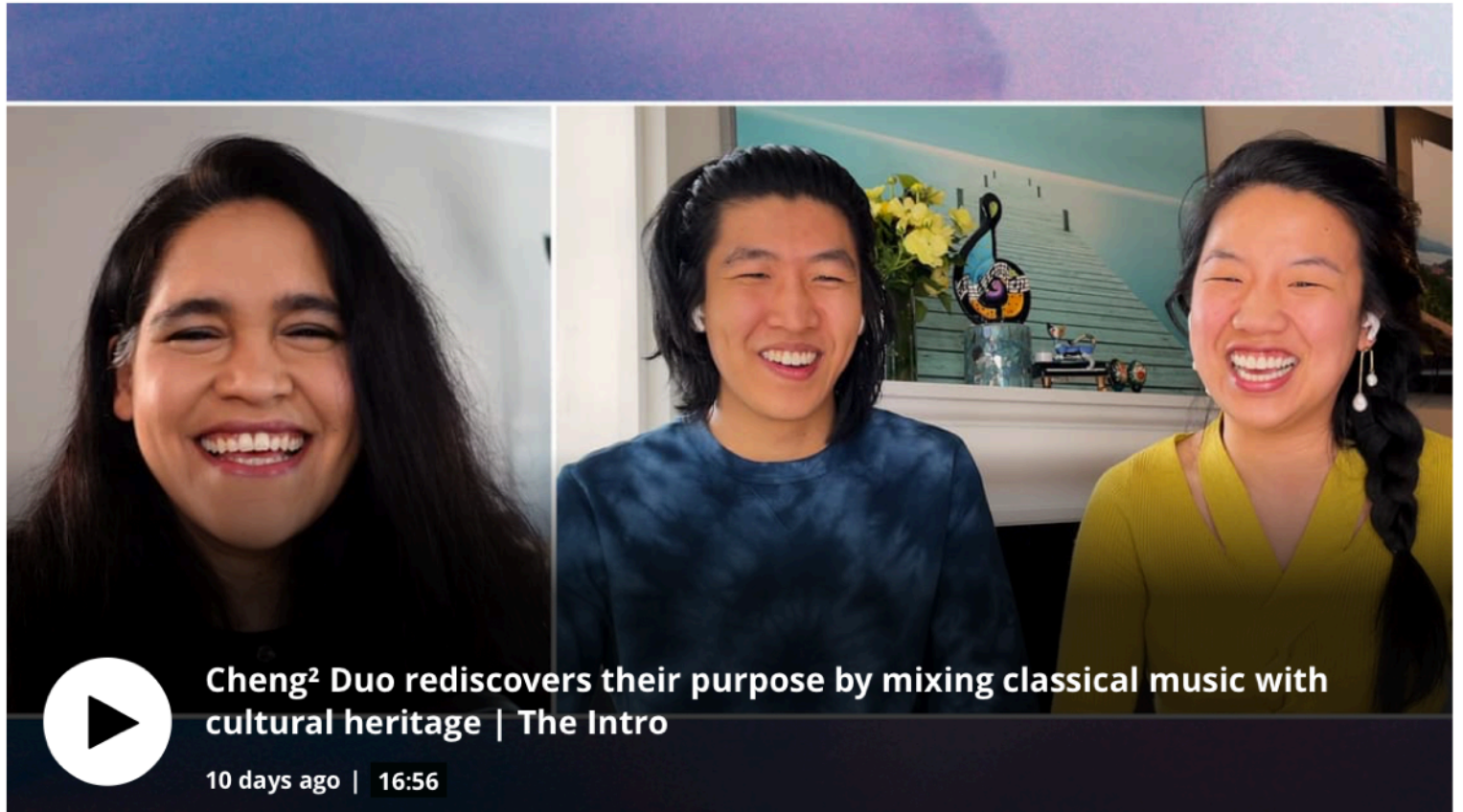
Music

How Cheng² Duo rediscovered their purpose as classical musicians during the pandemic



'When there is no 'next,' it's up to you to think about what you want to be putting out there'

[Robert Rowat](#) · CBC Music · Posted: May 05, 2021 10:00 AM ET | Last Updated: 6 hours ago



Cheng² Duo join Saroja Coelho on this week's episode of The Intro. 16:56

Watch Cheng² Duo perform two pieces and chat with Saroja Coelho on The Intro, above, and hit play on [The Intro stream](#), filled with songs from artists featured on CBC Music's emerging artist series.

"Back when we had all those [concert] cancellations, it seemed hopeless," recalls cellist Bryan Cheng, half of Cheng² Duo, during a recent Zoom call with CBC Music. "Every day we would dread opening our email app because it would just be like, 'Sorry to say, this has been cancelled. Sorry, this has been postponed.' When you're faced with this torrent of bad news, it's so hard. Like, why am I still making music?"

For Bryan's sister and duo partner, pianist Silvie Cheng, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic was not only disheartening but also disorienting. "At our phase in our career — we're still in our emerging phase — it's been interesting to see the rhythm of your life and your calendar build up and snowball and have this momentum. And then, to suddenly have it be on pause — I just think none of us had ever experienced that sort of feeling."

Of course, when classical musicians suddenly find themselves with time on their hands, their first instinct is to *practise*. But for Bryan and Silvie, it was also time to think.

"It made both of us, first of all, rediscover our love for classical music and also our purpose and why we feel like this music is still relevant, even in these crazy times," Bryan says. "And that also made us think about different projects in the long term that will continue to inspire us. It was a very tough time not being able to play all these concerts, but it also gave us time to learn more about ourselves, I think, and to feel like we were more connected."



Cheng² Duo performs "Ludwig van Beethoven: Sonata No. 3 in A Major, Op. 69, III (Adagio cantabile — Allegro vivace)" on The Intro. 6:54

More than one year into the pandemic, Silvie says she's actually grateful for what it has given to them.

"It was a rare chance for us to really pause," she explains. "You end up chasing deadlines a lot and you practise for your next concert or your next recording. [But] when there is no 'next,' it's up to you to think about, well, what if instead of the dates driving your life, it's more like, what do you want to be putting out there?"

They observed some of their musician friends becoming hyper-productive, posting daily "100 days of practise" updates on Instagram, for instance.

"There was a camp of people who didn't know what to do if they weren't, like, showing that they were doing something," muses Silvie. "And then there are people like us, I guess, who weren't necessarily 'hermiting,' but I was like, wait a minute, maybe we don't have to be *producing* all the time. We can just simmer and absorb what's happening and really let it sit. And then, when we're ready, something new will come up."

Bryan and Silvie weren't exactly idle during the long months of the pandemic. Bryan completed his undergraduate degree at Berlin's Universität der Künste and won first prize at the Bader & Overton Canadian Cello Competition, while Silvie taught at the Manhattan School of Music (where she had earlier completed her master's degree) and continued her stint as artist in residence at New York City's National Arts Club.



Cheng² Duo perform at Carnegie Hall in New York City in 2017.
(Kissick Photography)

And Cheng² Duo did manage to give some concerts before the pandemic's second wave struck.

"It was looking like things were OK in Canada in September," Bryan says. "We had two or three concerts in Ottawa and Montreal, which just happened out of the blue. And then, right after we played those concerts, both of those halls shut down immediately."

But the extraordinary circumstances of the past year — and being apart more than usual — have reinvigorated their musical partnership.

"I find that this year, especially with Bryan growing a lot, musically, on his own, it's now very interesting," Silvie says. "In rehearsal, he talks about things that he's learnt in Berlin and [likewise] me in New York. And we now have more in-depth conversations, whereas before we just always thought of music in the exact same way."

“When we think of Asian music, we think of pentatonic scales and gongs, but there's so much more than that.”

- *Silvie Cheng*

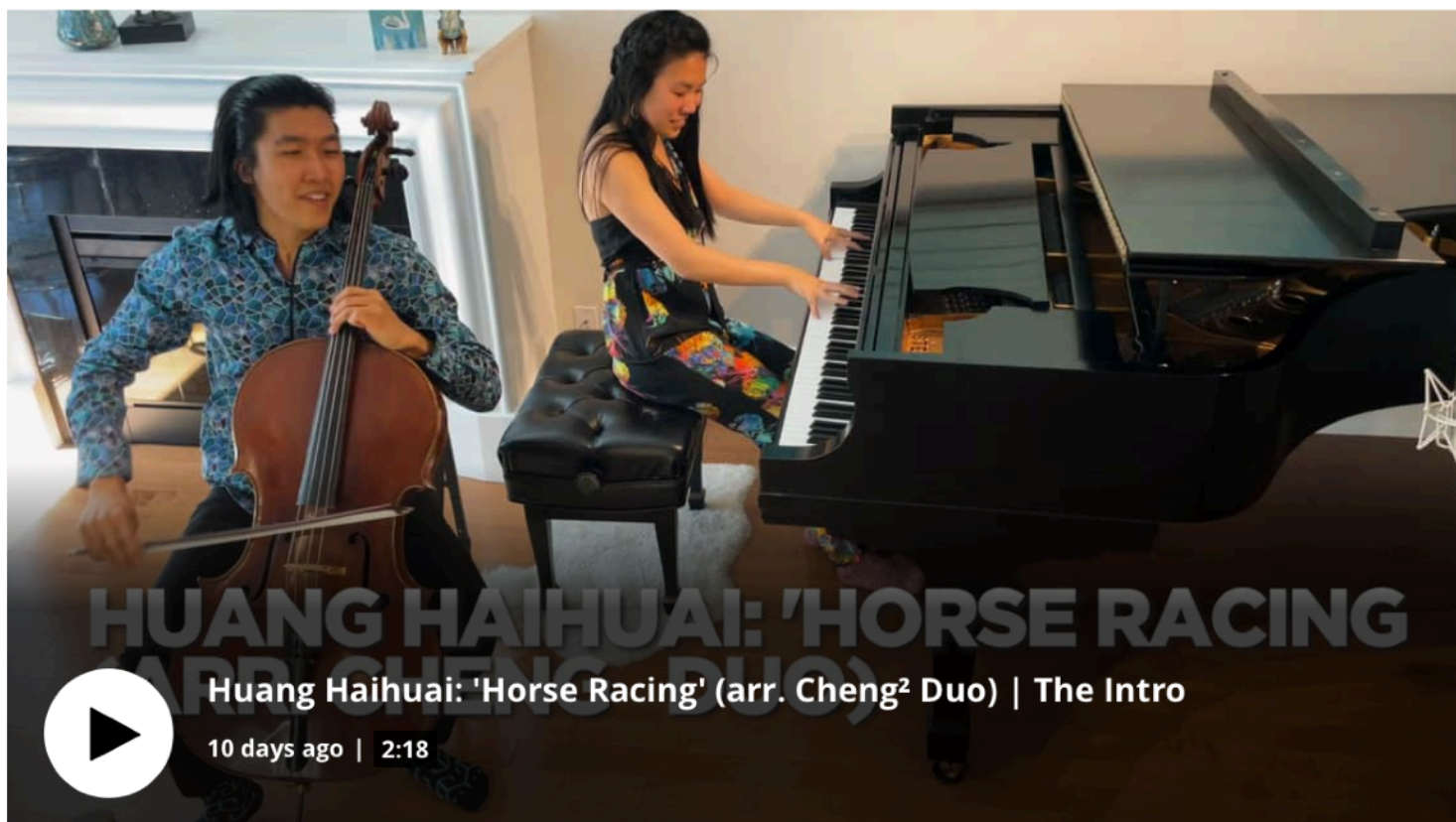
This extra time for reflection and personal development has helped Bryan and Silvie settle on a theme for their next album, having previously released albums devoted to French, Spanish and Russian music.

"Given these times that we've been living in, we thought it was the perfect moment to start thinking about an album of composers from our heritage," Bryan announces. "We find ourselves in this very unique position of being ... raised in North America and playing this very traditional Western classical music. But we come from this heritage, which also has this deep and rich tradition of music. We thought it would be really cool to explore those two worlds, and not just the typical East-meets-West, but to really go in-depth and do something that probably not a lot of classical musicians have done in the past."

Bryan says the album will include works that Cheng² Duo has commissioned in the past from composers of Asian heritage as well as transcriptions of traditional works for ancient instruments that have never been heard by the wider public.

Silvie points out that they intend to feature South, Central and East Asian music, in addition to Chinese. "When we think of Asian music, we think of pentatonic scales and gongs, but there's so much more than that," she says.

"We love the masterworks, of course, of classical music. But classical music is still growing. People are still writing it today and we really want to highlight the voices of our generation, the next generation," she explains. "It's a question of representation. As much as we love Beethoven — we're still playing him, obviously — we're going to highlight women and minorities and different voices that deserve to have the spotlight on them, too."



Cheng² Duo perform "Huang Haihuai: 'Horse Racing'" on The Intro. 2:18

<https://www.cbc.ca/music/how-cheng-duo-rediscovered-their-purpose-as-classical-musicians-during-the-pandemic-1.6006876>