

# Canadian Sibling Duo Shines in a Sold-out Concert at Carnegie Hall



"The measure of the best talent is how they play the best music", said Jeffrey Cohen, Silvie Cheng's piano teacher at the Manhattan School of Music, just after she played the great Mozart A minor Piano Sonata No. 8. He was much impressed by her second movement: "It was so good!" he exclaims. Talented Silvie is, for sure. She literally sculpts the music from the instrument. "Ah this piano is so bright", warned Mr. Cohen before the concert. However under the young woman's hands, the instrument had a ravishingly soft but always pointed sound. Having a great feeling for the pacing, she excels in the art of time, commanding the rebounds and resonances as she pleases.

At 15, her brother, the cellist Bryan Cheng, takes to the stage like a fish to water. Undeniably he is a prodigious musician and seems to understand with great maturity what music is all about. The young cellist has lost his mentor – his late teacher, Yuli Turovsky passed away last January. Being at a very decisive age, we hope that he will soon find someone who will be able to give him good advice and who will nurture his talent.

Silvie Cheng started the piano as a hobby. When she was four years old she went on a road trip to the East coast of Canada with her parents. Some days they were driving for 6-10 hours a day, so they put the little girl in the back seat with a lot of toys. One of them was a two-octave blue plastic keyboard that her mom had gotten from Japan. Apparently the little girl would be bored with all the other toys after 5 minutes but kept coming back to play on the keyboard, so her mom asked her if she would like to start piano lessons.

She was 6-and-a-half when Bryan was born. "I was the one who begged to have a sibling for years", says Silvie with sparkles in her eyes. "Every time there was a fountain I would ask for a penny and I would make a wish, and if my parents asked what I wished for I would answer for a sibling, I just always wanted that." Bryan grew up going to his sister's student recitals and would stand beside the piano while she was practicing, dancing and clapping his hands. It was therefore natural for him to also ask to play music. But he didn't want to play the same instrument as his sister. In fact, at age 3, he wanted to play the drums or the double bass. But, because he was too small for those big instruments, his mom thought he could play the violin. The little boy went to hear a violin master class but ran away because he said it was too squeaky. Then his mom took him to hear the cello and it was love at first sight (or maybe love at first sound?). It was because of its "deep and scary sound" he said. From the beginning he knew he wanted to play the cello professionally.

The brother and sister team has a very playful way of thinking about music. People go to the concert hall to escape the routine of their daily lives, so musicians need to transport them to different worlds. "We are like tour guides", says the older sister smiling, "we welcome you to our little spaceship to embark on a musical journey together, we show you different sights along the way, and when it's finished you are changed inside - or at least we hope you are." Sometimes it might take going beyond the comfort zone and not just sitting down and playing. That is why the siblings stand and talk in English, Chinese and French, if they have to! They think it is very important to



address the audience "so people realize that we are not robots, that we are real humans, that we have stories to share. Our music is enhanced by our lives and by our relationship together as brother and sister, and vice versa, our bond is stronger through the music we play."

Lately, the young musicians have started working with living composers. For the Carnegie Hall recital, they worked with Canadian composer Alexina Louie. This is another way that the young musicians have found to connect to the music creation process. They loved the experience of working with the composer to understand what's in her mind, and to help contribute in fine-tuning the score for certain inflections and nuances, in order for future performers to bring the music to life to other audiences. It has been a very rewarding process, which they would like to do again. Many supporters wanted to help them in championing new music, and Ms. Louie received the maximum grant from the Toronto Arts Council. They have now started to establish the Cheng2 Duo New Music Fund to continue to commission new works! For their next project in the future, they would like to commission a double concerto for piano, cello and orchestra.

In addition to their devoted audience throughout Canada and now in New York, Bryan and Silvie have very supportive parents. Their parents grew up in China during the Cultural Revolution and didn't have many choices. They studied what they were expected to. They therefore wanted to raise their children in a way that would allow them to do what they love most. Growing up in Canada's capital city, both Bryan and Silvie have had plenty of opportunities to discover their passion. "Life is short; we have so much room and energy to give everything, and you have to find that thing that makes you happy to wake up for in the morning everyday and, for us, at the moment that thing is definitely music", says Silvie.

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*Jacqueline Vanasse*