



Brother/sister act: Cheng² Duo celebrate Canada 150 with a special concert at National Gallery

MUSIC
BY PETER ROBB | JUNE 6, 2017 | 0 COMMENTS

SILVIE AND BRYAN CHENG ARE PREPARING A SPECIAL CANADA 150 PROJECT AND PERFORMANCE ON JUNE 22. PHOTO: UWE ARENS

Silvie plays the piano and Bryan the cello. Together the Ottawa siblings make up **Cheng² Duo** and together they are touring the world. On June 22, they'll be presenting a specially developed performance of music that they have commissioned that will speak to the five regions of Canada. Before the exclusive, invite-only show at the National Gallery of Canada, they answered some questions from ARTSFILE.

Q. It's been a while since we spoke, catch me up on Cheng² Duo.

Bryan: We've done quite a bit of touring in the past year — a 13-city tour of China in the summer of 2016, a fall tour of Eastern Canada as Debut Atlantic artists, and several tours are coming up in 2018: British Columbia (January), a month-long Ontario and Québec tour with Jeunesses Musicales Canada (February-March), and then in the U.S. right after that (March). In addition, we released our debut album in October 2016, titled *Violoncelle français*, on the German label *audite*. This album features all-French masterworks for cello and piano, and this October we will be recording our second album, composed of all-Spanish music, in Berlin.

Q. One of the things on your horizon is a performance at the National Gallery Auditorium. What is the project about?

Silvie: This is the most significant project we have ever undertaken, and it happens to be in the context of celebrating Canada's sesquicentennial. As artists who have had the good fortune of travelling and living in different parts of the world, we take immense pride in being Canadian (especially with the nation's capital being our hometown). We wanted to commemorate this year with a major project that highlights Canada's natural beauty and rich diversity of artistic creativity. Taking in the unique identities of the five regions of the country (Atlantic, Central, North, Prairies, West), we commissioned a composer from each region to write a new 10-15 minute work for cello and piano. Each composer* was asked to write a piece that was inspired by the environment of the region around them and to reflect on natural elements (such as fire, snow, water, mountains, etc.). In the meantime, we partnered with Canadian filmmakers, photographers, and organizations, such as photographer [Edward Burtynsky](#), and Parks Canada, to explore visual source material that could complement the commissions and add another dimension to the works. Finally, in collaboration with the video production studio Normal of Montreal, all the elements will be integrated with our live performance to create a special concert experience. On June 22, the five pieces will each receive their world premiere at the National Gallery, and our "brainchild" will officially launch, coinciding with the opening of the Gallery's new Canadian wing that week. Our goal is to bring this aural, visual, and emotional journey across Canada, but also to audiences around the world. Performances in Winnipeg, Regina, and Vancouver this fall/winter are being planned.

Q. Why did you embark on such a program.

Bryan: One of our biggest missions as classical musicians is to engage audiences of all ages, especially people of our age who are very visually stimulated, but haven't necessarily had the chance to develop an appreciation for classical music. While we have been speaking at our concerts about our programmes for many years now (something audiences appreciate), we felt that adding another dimension to live concert experiences to complement the music, would be a worthwhile path to explore. This specific idea has been brewing for a few years, and we've had a chance to watch and learn from several other projects that delve into the multimedia realm. The end goal is to create an unforgettable experience that affects people through many senses. This kind of undertaking also furthers our art forms as a whole. Historically, writers, painters, composers, all shared ideas with one another, something that doesn't necessarily happen as prolifically nowadays. So I guess you could call this a barrier-breaking project — barriers between different art forms, as well as between the audience and performer. And the fact that every artist, composer, and collaborator featured in this project is Canadian makes it much more special.

Q. Bryan, when we spoke a few years ago now, you weren't necessarily thinking about a musical career? Has your ambition changed?

Bryan: Actually, I've dreamed of being a professional cellist ever since I started playing at age three and a half. I believe the last time we spoke I was thinking of doing a double major in music and history at university, but after acknowledging that music is my one true calling, I decided to blaze ahead focusing on the cello. I'm now studying in Berlin at the University of the Arts with **Jens Peter Maintz**. My parents always hoped I could be a scientist — they often said that judging by the questions I always ask, I would have been a good one. Maybe in my next life.

Q. Silvie, what are your career plans?

Silvie: Since graduating from the Manhattan School of Music in 2015, I have been fortunate to be able to balance a full performing and teaching schedule. Besides touring with Bryan, I am the pianist of the New York-based trio **sTem** (voice, clarinet, piano), which mainly specializes in contemporary music and collaborations with living composers. Chamber music has long been one of my main passions, though I still give solo performances as well. I love connecting with both audiences and students, and I feel like music education is more important now than ever. Since 2013, I have been on the roster of teaching-artists in the **Manhattan School of Music's** Distance Learning Program, where I give weekly videoconference lessons to high school students around the world (my students are from Alaska to England to Maine). I also teach through the **Bridge Arts Ensemble**, a New York-based organization that travels to the Adirondack region for week-long residencies to give concerts, coaching sessions, and workshops to K-12 students. I feel blessed to not only be able to spend every day with music, whether it's performing, collaborating, working on commissions, or nurturing the next generation of music-lovers, but also be able to enjoy a rich diversity of activities day-to-day that New York has to offer.

Q. Brother and sister working together, how do you manage to co-operate?

Silvie: I've always said that the greatest decision Bryan ever made in his life was when he chose NOT to play the piano, insisting on playing a different instrument. That choice led to an extremely natural musical partnership. Having played together for 13 years and travelled quite extensively together for the past five years, the best part is that we both feel comfortable as a team on and off the stage. On the road, we both love similar foods and are understanding of each other's routines and preferences. We haven't been living in the same home base city since 2009, so we treasure every chance to spend extended quality time together — we still do countdowns to the next time we see each other whenever we say goodbye at the airport. With Bryan based in Berlin now and me in New York, the biggest stress is probably co-ordinating our travel schedule and booking an extra seat for Bryan's beloved cello (the inconsistent policies between airlines on musical instruments in the cabin can be a real pain.).

Q. Where do you see yourselves two years down the road?

Bryan: We usually book one or two seasons ahead. We are also constantly planning and proposing new programmes for presenters of future concerts, so for us, two years is just around the corner. I'll be graduating from university (if my travel schedule allows), and I'd like to continue playing a lot of concerts, travelling the world while doing so, and coming up with new and fresh ideas, like the Canada 150 project. Change is something that not everyone is comfortable with, but it's essential, especially as a modern-day artist, so I look forward to re-inventing myself every once in a while.

Silvie: We are already booking concerts for the 2018-19 season, so we almost have an exact idea of where we'll be in two years. To be honest, I couldn't think of a more fulfilling and enriching time than what we are experiencing right now at this point in our lives. If I can continue to juggle my hats as a solo and chamber musician, recording artist, project commissioner, and educator, while leading a balanced lifestyle, I'll be happy.

Q. Imagine yourselves 10 years down the road?

Bryan: One never knows what life throws at you, so 10 years is just way too far. I'd like to be doing everything that we're doing now, but at a greater level and frequency. One of my interests for a while now has been presenting marathon concerts, for example, all five of Beethoven's cello sonatas in one concert or a cycle of the six Bach cello suites. I hope to realize these soon. What makes everything so exciting, is that there are so many opportunities and doors just waiting to be sprung open, so the only thing I can say for sure is that I'll keep on my toes and be ready for whatever comes my way.

Silvie: If you had asked me this question 10 years ago, I could not have predicted my life right now, so who knows where I'll even live in a decade? That being said, one always has hopes, dreams, and ideas. I have found that I particularly enjoy the recording process, so I hope that Bryan and I will have recorded at least five albums together by 2027 — luckily for us, there is still so much cello/piano repertoire to discover. There are many places and audiences in the world where we have yet to have a chance to play and share our music with. I hope we get to bring classical music to every continent in the years to come! Another longtime dream of mine is to learn and perform all 27 Mozart piano concerti — I'm about a third of the way there, but I'd like to spend more time with that project. Living in New York and being constantly inspired by the cross-pollination of the arts, I also have some ideas brewing for live concert experiences that unite lovers of classical, jazz, and new music. In the interest of bringing people of all walks of life together, perhaps I'll also be in the developing stages of a creative music festival.



* The composers are: Carmen Braden (Yellowknife, NWT); Derek Charke (Wolfville, N.S.); Vincent Ho (Calgary); Jordan Pal (Toronto) and Rodney Sharman (Vancouver)



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Peter Robb began his connection with the arts community in Ottawa in the mid-1980s when he was the administrator and public relations director of the Great Canadian Theatre Company. After a long career in journalism with the Ottawa Citizen where he served in a number of different posts he returned to the arts when he became the Citizen's arts editor.
