

Mei Han & Randy Raine-Reusch

presented by Vancouver Sun
Community Concert Series
Friday, August 24, 7:30pm
Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical
Chinese Garden
by Colin MacDonald

There has been much talk about the “collision” of cultures in our city, due in part to Vancouver’s status as a major port on the Pacific Rim. Rather than violent conflicts, there have been many friendly opportunities for artists from different cultural backgrounds to share ideas and reinvent their own work. Chinese zheng virtuoso Mei Han and Canadian multi-instrumentalist Randy Raine-Reusch have been exploring musical territory that is both new and traditional, and they shared some of their experiments in a concert celebrating the release of their first CD, *Distant Wind*.

Han is an internationally recognized virtuoso and scholar of the zheng (pronounced: *jung*), a traditional Chinese zither with a history going back 2000 years, and a parent instrument of the more familiar Japanese koto. As a performer of classical Chinese music, Han was not expected to compose or even to improvise, so she didn’t have an opportunity to practice these skills before she met Randy Raine-Reusch. Raine-Reusch has been collecting and performing on world instruments for many years, including the zheng, and he encouraged Han to find her own expression, teaching her to improvise on her instrument.

Together they have been developing a repertoire that draws on the vocabulary of the traditional music of China, Japan, and other asian countries, but within composed structures that allow for

the freedom of improvisation. Much like in jazz, these compositions are little more than frameworks within which the performers get to show off their skills. Their brand of modal improv may not be innovative in itself, but it is new to hear this Chinese instrument played outside of its characteristically formal tradition. Han also claims to be reconnecting with earlier forms of classical Chinese music that did include improvisation, before the practice became codified in the conservatory system.

The majority of the program consisted of these collaborative improvisations with Han and Raine-Reusch each taking turns soloing on the zheng, while the other provided an ostinato background. Local jazz bassist Laurence Mollerup occasionally joined in to fill out the lower register. On *Distant Wind* Han proved her virtuosity, playing with a rich, assured tone, her lyrical phrasing coloured by judiciously applied tremolos, vibrato, and note bends. Raine-Reusch played more aggressively, and on *Dragon Dogs* he took the emotional lead, but his tone on the zheng was consistently weak when heard alongside Han's strong touch.

The real potential of the collaboration came out in an arrangement of a traditional melody, *Meeting in the Yurt*. Raine-Reusch gave a sample of overtone singing (singing two notes at once) to introduce Han's melody, after which he took a zheng solo that showed definite hints of bluegrass. While Raine-Reusch was not a master of any specific device, his talent for playing many Asian instruments, and for choosing exotic sounds that are complementary, moved the performance out of the realm of a novelty act and showed true musical sensitivity.

In the spirit of exploration that seeks to unify musical cultures, Raine-Reusch and Han's music is a careful step into a world of greater expressive freedom.