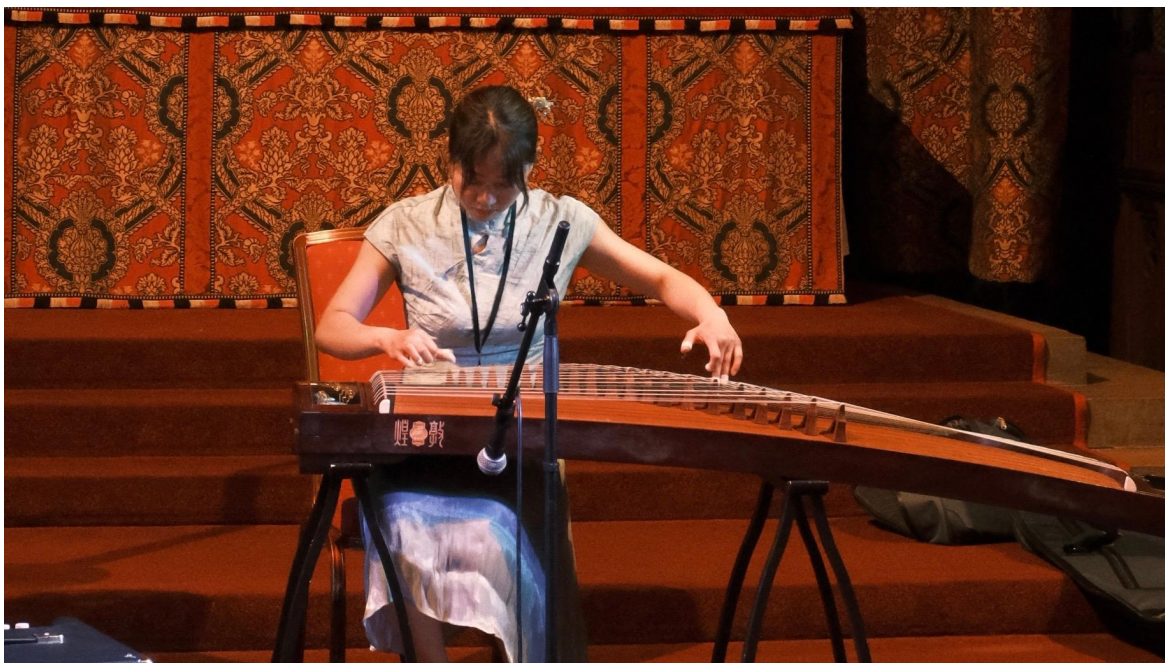


Strings Rise in Britain, Zheng Art Resonates Across Cultures -Exclusive Interview with Chen Yu, a Young Guzheng Performer Based in the UK: Let the 21 Strings Become a Language for Cross-Cultural Exchange

Published on August 1, 2026 12:16:00 | Source: www.chnmusic.cn

By Jiang Han



(Person in the photo: Chen Yu - Joy, playing the guzheng at Queen's College, University of Cambridge)

"Joy is a young musician with exceptional professionalism and development potential. *She not only pursues excellence in performance standards, but also builds bridges for exchanges between different cultures through music, has carried out remarkably meaningful practices for the international dissemination of traditional Chinese music and the guzheng, and actively explores artistic dialogues between traditional Chinese music and Western classical music.* " — Dr Ewan Campbell (Composer at the Faculty of Music, University of Cambridge, UK, internationally award-winning composer, composer for the London Symphony Orchestra (LSO)).

In the UK, from special concerts to community cultural and artistic activities, a traditional Chinese musical instrument with 21 strings is being recognized by an increasing number of audiences. Standing in the center of the stage is Chen Yu (Joy), a young guzheng performer. Over the years, she has remained active in performances,

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Date of Translation: August 19, 2026



education and cross-cultural art practices in the UK, hoping that the guzheng will not only be a symbol of traditional Chinese culture, but also become a voice with independent artistic value on the international stage.

Recently, The Musician magazine and China Music Network conducted an exclusive interview with Chen Yu, to listen to and discuss her thoughts on music inheritance and artistic innovation.



(Photo source: Communication scene of the Cambridge Concert, UK)

I. Nearly 25 Years of Training and Practice: Guzheng as a Lifelong Commitment

Chen Yu's guzheng performance skills come from nearly 25 years of systematic training and continuous stage practice. For her, playing the guzheng is not simply "playing a melody", but shaping the structure, emotion and artistic conception of the work through every string touch, every glissando, every breathing pause and every change of dynamics.

Q: You started learning the guzheng at the age of four. Up to now, is the guzheng still the same musical instrument as it was in your childhood?

Chen Yu: For me, it is so different from what it used to be. When I was a child, I thought the guzheng was a very beautiful and large musical instrument with a pleasant sound. But after I started learning it, I found that it is really not easy to play the guzheng well. It requires long hours of practice, memorizing music scores, wrapping thick tape around the fingers, and sitting for hours on end. The difficult part is often not learning a certain

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movement, but keeping the details consistent over a long period of time. The position of string touching, the degree of glissando, breathing pauses and dynamics seem trivial when viewed separately, but in a piece of work, if any part is slack, the direction of the music will change. The longer I train, the more I realize that the so-called basic skills are not something that can be finished once and for all; they will always stay with the performer. After practicing for a long time, I feel that I can sense the composer's emotions from different musical phrases, and gradually the guzheng has become a way for me to understand and express myself. Many feelings are not necessarily suitable to be expressed directly, but they can be conveyed through sound. So looking back now, the relationship between the guzheng and me is not simply "having learned a musical instrument", but that we have experienced a long period of growth together.



(Professional music competition awards won by Chen Yu in 2026)

Q: What do you value most when judging whether a guzheng performance is truly mature?

Chen Yu: I think accuracy and proficiency are of course the foundation, but being only accurate and proficient is not enough. I will see whether the performance clearly presents the structure of the work, whether the emotion progresses naturally, whether there is a sense of breathing between notes, and whether the physical expression is harmonious and reasonable. The guzheng actually has a lot of very subtle changes; for the same glissando or the same section of tremolo, a slight difference in dynamics and duration will convey a different meaning. A truly mature performance should not be limited to the level of fingering techniques.

Q: You once mentioned that the guzheng helped you cope with the attention challenges caused by ADHD in your childhood. What impact has this experience had on you?

Chen Yu: When I was a child, my parents and I didn't know what ADHD was. We just noticed that it was very difficult for me to focus on one thing, and my attention was easily distracted by other things. But gradually I found that after I started learning the guzheng, I needed to focus my attention on each string and each musical

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phrase. This process has gradually helped me build a sense of order, patience and self-regulation ability. While enjoying the music, I was also developing my concentration. When I grew up, I realized that apart from training skills, music can also help a person find a rhythm that suits them. That is why when I later engage in guzheng-related educational activities, I pay special attention to children's real feelings, and this experience has also become an important foundation for me to understand the public value of music. For me, being professional not only means having mature skills, but also being able to transform personal experiences into more stable and powerful artistic expressions.

II. Playing the Guzheng on the British Stage: Let More People Hear the Sound of the Guzheng

After going to the UK at the age of 16, Chen Yu has been continuously introducing the guzheng to the local music and cultural scenes in the UK. She has participated in concerts, cultural events, community art projects and cross-cultural performances in Cambridge, Norwich, London and other places, and introduced the structure, techniques and repertoire background of the guzheng to international audiences. From winning competitions to performing in the UK, from campus music platforms to local cultural events, Chen Yu's artistic practices show continuity and expansibility. In the process of constantly visiting different cities and facing diverse artistic contexts and audiences, she has gradually increased the exposure of the guzheng in the UK's music scenes.

Q: After going to the UK, why have you been seeking performance opportunities in different cities such as Cambridge, Norwich and London?

Chen Yu: Because these cities are all connected to my personal experiences. Cambridge is an important place where I studied and carried out music practices. I have performed on university music platforms and in colleges, and also won the Music Scholarship of Churchill College, University of Cambridge. Norwich holds memories of my early life when I studied alone in the UK. Bringing the guzheng back there is more like re-establishing connections with the familiar community. The art scene in London is more open and diverse, and the guzheng will encounter a completely different audience there. The audiences of these platforms have very different backgrounds: some are familiar with Chinese music, while others are seeing the guzheng up close for the first time.

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(Image source: Cambridge Chinese Music Ensemble UK)

Q: When introducing this instrument to audiences who are contacting the guzheng for the first time, what do you usually talk about?

Chen Yu: I will talk about the structure of the instrument, basic techniques, and the background of the repertoire together. If you only talk about history, the audience may feel that it is very far away from them; If you only demonstrate skills, it will easily turn into a lively performance. The best way is to let them listen while understanding how this sound is produced and why it is handled this way. When engaging with the work again in this way, they will have a relatively concrete starting point. For me, this forces me to think through many things clearly: Why this work was selected, how to introduce it, and where the audience can start to engage with it. A performance is not just about finishing playing the piece; it is also about making people who are hearing it for the first time willing to continue listening.

Q: Facing international audiences who are exposed to the guzheng for the first time, what do you most hope they will hear?

Chen Yu: "Chinese musical instrument" is certainly its identity, but we cannot just stay on this label. I would rather let the audience hear its complete musical language: How the timbre changes, how the phrases breathe, and how a work expresses emotions and artistic conception. The guzheng can represent Chinese culture, but it should also, like other musical instruments, be understood through its own sound and works, not just because it looks very distinctive of the East.

Q: From campus platforms to local cultural activities, what do you think of the accumulation brought by these performances?

Chen Yu: A single performance will not change anything immediately, but different venues and different audiences will allow me to constantly adjust my expression. When arriving in a new city, I have to reconsider how to introduce the guzheng, how to select pieces, and how to make the sound connect with that particular live venue. After doing this many times, I will become more mature, and there will be one more entry point for the guzheng to be heard in the local music scene in the UK.

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Photo | Chen Yu discusses the new arrangement of guzheng music with Dr Ewan Campbell

III. Entering British schools and working with children with special needs: Expanding the public value of the guzheng

In addition to stage performances, Chen Yu also actively cooperates with various British schools to integrate the guzheng into educational scenarios. As a performer with both professional education and music backgrounds, she attaches great importance to the role of art, especially music, in children's growth and cultural understanding. She has helped British children and teenagers get to know the guzheng up close and learn about its history, structure, timbre and playing methods through school activities, music demonstrations and interactive explanations. Chen Yu also pays special attention to children with special educational needs. She does not simply define the guzheng as a "therapeutic tool", but regards it as a multi-sensory artistic medium: Children can hear the sound, see the vibration of the strings, feel the changes of rhythm, and establish a connection with the instrument through touch and observation. She hopes to cooperate with more schools, communities and educational institutions in the future, so that the guzheng can become an important bridge for children to access Chinese culture, sound art and diverse expressions.



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Q: Why do you regard schools and children's education as an important part of guzheng promotion?

Chen Yu: Children's reactions to sound are very direct, regardless of nationality and race, and this is precisely the importance of music for children's education. British children certainly will not first ask me which genre it belongs to, but will first hear "this sound is very much like water" "that section is like wind". This first encounter is very important. If they are made to feel that the guzheng is just a distant cultural symbol at the very beginning, it will be difficult to build real interest later. So I prefer to let them listen, look and touch first, and then slowly supplement the historical and cultural background.

Q: In school activities, how do you explain the guzheng in a way that is both accurate and easy to understand?

Chen Yu: I usually start with sound. Portamento can be like flowing water, tremolo can form a continuous melody, and glissando can bring out the feeling of wind, rain or waves. For example, in "Fighting the Typhoon", I can produce the sound of an approaching typhoon through the strings, which is very interesting! After children hear the changes, they then watch how the strings vibrate and how the fingers move, which makes it easy to connect abstract techniques with specific sounds. Professional content cannot be explained incorrectly, but there is no need to cram a lot of terminology into them at the beginning.

Q: After the event, what do you most hope the children will remember?

Chen Yu: It is not necessary to remember the name of a certain technique. I would rather they remember that the guzheng is not just a "Chinese musical instrument" that only appears in pictures; it can truly express nature, emotions and stories. If they hear a similar sound in the future and are willing to stop and listen, or even want to learn a little more, I think this encounter will be meaningful.

Q: When interacting with children with special educational needs, how do you understand the role that the guzheng can play?

Chen Yu: I am reluctant to easily call it a "therapeutic tool", because that would overstate the role of music. The guzheng is first and foremost a multi-sensory artistic medium: Children can hear the sound, see the vibration of the strings, feel the changes of rhythm, and establish a connection with the instrument through touch and observation. Each child engages with music in a different way, and what matters is to give them sufficiently concrete, pressure-free opportunities for exposure.

Q: Will these kinds of educational activities in turn change your performance?

Chen Yu: It will. Children's reactions will make me refocus on some of the most basic things, such as why a certain tone is attractive, and why a certain rhythm allows people to follow along immediately. After a long period of practice, performers sometimes get used to viewing works from a professional perspective; Spending time with children will pull me back to the most direct listening experience.

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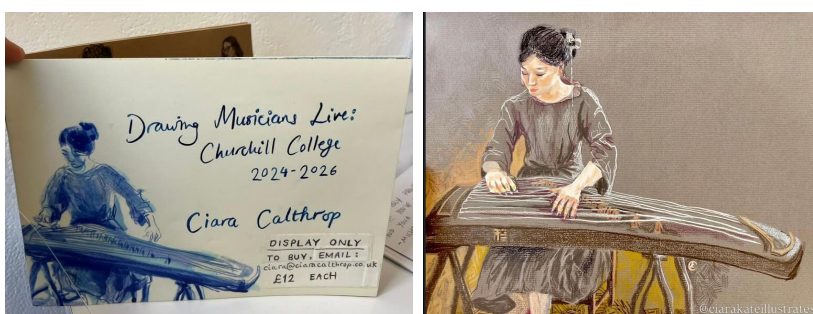
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IV. Cross-border Cooperation and Future Development: Integrating guzheng into the international art context

Chen Yu's expectations for guzheng are not limited to traditional stages. While respecting the history and technical system of guzheng, she also hopes to explore its possibilities with contemporary art, visual art, dance, video and cross-cultural creation. In recent years, she has collaborated with British artists to combine guzheng with visual art and create illustration works that integrate oriental poetry and contemporary aesthetics. In such collaborations, the guzheng is no longer just background music, but has become one of the core inspirations of the work. The lines, rhythms, emotions and artistic conception in the music are transformed into colors, compositions and visual narratives in the images, helping more audiences understand traditional Chinese music through different art forms.



(Image and illustration source: British illustrator Ciara Calthrop)

Q: In your opinion, what kind of relationship should be established between tradition and innovation?

Chen Yu: I don't think tradition and innovation are an either-or choice. The more you want to reach out, the more you must first know what the original sound, structure and aesthetics of this instrument are. Otherwise, the so-called innovation will easily be left with nothing but a novel shell. The guzheng can collaborate with visual art, dance, video and music from different cultures, but it must not lose its own judgment and position in the collaboration.

"I don't want the guzheng to be just a decorative Oriental element. I hope it can truly participate in artistic creation and become a voice with subjectivity in different forms of art works." — Chen Yu

Q: You just mentioned "decorative Oriental element". What kind of collaboration makes you feel that it is only superficial?

Chen Yu: If the work only needs an image that looks very Oriental, or only intercepts a few seconds of special timbre, but does not care about why the guzheng produces sound this way and what role this piece of music plays in the work, I will think that it has not really entered the creation. Crossover is not about putting several

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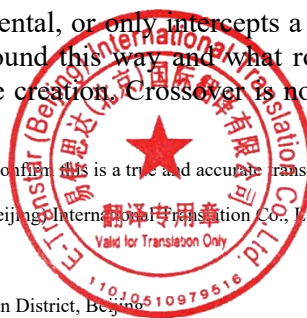
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elements together, but about letting them influence each other. After the guzheng is added, the structure, emotion or narrative of the work should really change.

Q: What new expression spaces have you seen from your collaboration with visual artists?

Chen Yu: Visual art has shown me that some things in music that are difficult to explain in words can be preserved in another way. The direction of the melody will become lines, the rhythm may become composition, and the emotion and artistic conception will be reflected in the colors. In this way, the guzheng is not just a piece of soundtrack next to the picture, but one of the reasons for the creation of the image. The audience also has an additional entrance to get close to this instrument.

Q: What exactly do you mean by "subjectivity"?

Chen Yu: Simply put, it means that the guzheng is not put into the work as an ornament, but participates in the formation of the work. It should have its own logic in terms of what sound to choose, how to develop, and how to respond to other media. If the meaning and structure of the work will be affected when the guzheng is removed, that means it has truly participated in the creation.



Photo | Chen Yu doing dubbing for a theatrical work

V. Why do you insist on staying in the UK to promote the guzheng?

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When talking about the reason for insisting on promoting the guzheng in the UK, Chen Yu believes that real cultural exchange is not simply displaying an instrument, but building understanding between different cultures. She hopes that British audiences can not only hear the unique timbre of the guzheng, but also feel the aesthetics, emotions and cultural connotations behind traditional Chinese music. Looking to the future, she will continue to take the UK as an important development base, and further expand the scope of guzheng performances, education promotion and cross-border collaborations. She hopes to hold performances in more cities in the UK, participate in music festivals, projects of cultural institutions, school art activities and international exchange performances. She will also enhance the professional visibility of the guzheng in the UK's art environment through original projects and cross-cultural collaborations. From professional performance to cultural communication, from local stages in the UK to the international art context, Chen Yu is proving in her own way that: The guzheng can not only be heard by the world, but also develop vigorously on the UK and broader international stages as a professional, sustainable and creative artistic language.



Photo | Chen Yu performing guzheng at the Cambridge Dragon Boat Festival (photo provided by the interviewee)

Q: Why did you choose the UK as an important development base for guzheng performance and promotion?

Chen Yu: I study and live here, and have already established connections with different cities, schools, communities and art platforms. British audiences have diverse backgrounds: some are familiar with Asian culture, while others have never heard of the guzheng. This difference is very attractive to me, because every performance is not a repeated display, but a search for a way for the audience to engage with this piece of music.

Q: In your opinion, what is the biggest difference between "cultural display" and "cultural exchange"?

Chen Yu: "Display" is more like putting an object out to let everyone know it exists; "Exchange" goes one step further: it gives the other party the opportunity to understand, and allows the other party to respond with their own experience. For the guzheng, wearing traditional costumes and introducing its history can be the beginning, but they cannot be the whole thing. In the end, we still have to return to the music itself: Whether this piece of sound can be absorbed by a person who has no relevant cultural background.

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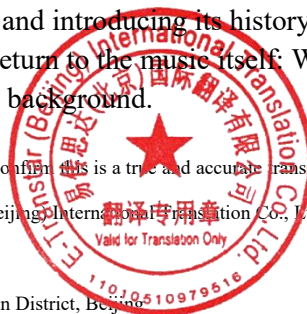
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(Image source: Chen Yu communicating with foreign friends about the sound and structure of guzheng)

Q: Next, where do you hope to extend this path?

Chen Yu: What I want to do next still covers three aspects: Performance, education and cross-border cooperation. In terms of performance, I want to go to more cities in the UK, and participate in music festivals, projects of cultural institutions and international exchange performances; In terms of education, I hope to continue to cooperate with schools and communities; In terms of creation, I want to carry out more original projects to connect guzheng with different art forms, such as drama. These things don't need to be done on a large scale all at once, but I hope I can keep doing them.

End of the interview

When it came to the end of the conversation, Chen Yu brought the topic back to "the sound itself" several times. Whether it is competitions, performances, school activities or cross-border cooperation, what she cares about is not how prominent a position guzheng is placed in, but whether the audience has truly listened to it attentively: Hearing its details, and understanding that it is not just a musical instrument with a cultural label. Her plans are not something out of reach in the distant future: One more performance for new audiences, one more activity where children can touch the strings with their own hands, one more cooperation in which guzheng can truly participate.

How far these 21 strings can go will eventually be answered little by little by Chen Yu's "persistence" in the days to come.

Introduction to the musician:

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Joy, whose Chinese name is Chen Yu, is a guzheng performer and promoter of Chinese culture currently residing in Cambridge, UK. She began to learn guzheng at the age of four, received long-term systematic training, and participated in professional instrumental competitions many times and won awards. After going to the UK at the age of 16, she has continued to polish her repertoire with the self-awareness of a professional performer, extensively participate in performances and expand cooperation, bringing guzheng into local British music scenes, school art projects, community cultural activities and cross-border creations. In recent years, Chen Yu has continuously participated in performances, cultural activities and music projects in many parts of the UK, and has repeatedly won awards related to ethnic music categories, professional groups and artistic performance in international music competitions; She has also received the Music Scholarship from Churchill College, University of Cambridge. These experiences have turned her guzheng practice from a mere continuation of personal interest into an artistic path with professional accumulation, public influence and international development potential.

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