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***The International Violin Competition of Indianapolis  
Presents Sirena Huang in Review***

Sirena Huang, violin  
Chih-Yi Chen, piano

Zankel Hall at Carnegie Hall, New York, NY  
April 26, 2025

The Zankel Hall recital debut of violinist Sirena Huang this weekend was an occasion for cheering from the moment she walked onstage with pianist Chih-Yi Chen. As 2022 Gold Medalist of The International Violin Competition of Indianapolis (IVCI), Ms. Huang has been busy performing across three continents as a recitalist, chamber musician, and soloist with numerous orchestras, including the New York Philharmonic, Cleveland Orchestra, and Baltimore and Indianapolis symphony orchestras – but this recital, presented by the IVCI, was to mark, three years after the fact, the 2022 victory of a competition some may recall as quite dramatic. Ms. Huang had fallen ill, testing positive for Covid soon after her arrival in Indianapolis; however, thanks to some schedule changes, she was able to recover partially for several days, performing last and sweeping just about every prize offered. Ms. Huang is clearly a survivor, with a resilience that will probably be needed just as much for an international career as for that 2022 ordeal. Her playing shows (unsurprisingly) that she has already conquered just about every

violin challenge there is – but with grace and an open mind, she seems poised to take on still more.

The program offered an interesting variety of familiar and lesser-known works. The first half included Stravinsky's ever-popular *Suite Italienne* and Poulenc's somewhat underappreciated Violin Sonata. After intermission came Beethoven's Violin Sonata No. 1 in D major, Op. 12, followed by music from the early twentieth century on, particularly from a group of "marginalized composers" as Ms. Huang describes in her program notes. From African-American composer Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson (1932-2004) we heard *Blue/s Forms*, and then from the composer he was named for, British-Sierra Leonean Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875-1912), we heard *Deep River*. Finally, from Chinese composer Chen Gang (b. 1935), we heard the showpiece *Sunshine on Tashkurgan*.

Opening with Stravinsky's *Suite Italienne* was a wise choice, establishing a neo-Baroque framework from which to dance into the program. It may be, as Ms. Huang describes in her notes "witty and satirical" – but, through Stravinsky's gaze across the centuries back to Pergolesi, the six dance movements are also sincerely expressive, from the regal *Introduzione* to the more pensive *Serenata* and feverish *Tarantella*. The duo captured their beauty and uplifted their audience from the first notes. The pianist Chih-Yi Chen was one hundred percent with Ms. Huang in each phrase – which is not as simple as it may sound (bringing to mind the Ginger Rogers quip about doing all that Fred Astaire did – but "backwards in high heels"). When Ms. Huang took an extremely soft echo in the repeat of the Gavotte, for example, one wondered how Ms. Chen could further soften the bass accompaniment with such a very live hall piano, but she did. Ms. Huang was exemplary in all ways, from intonation to bowing and phrasing.

Poulenc's Violin Sonata (1942-43), dedicated to Federico García Lorca, was refreshing to see on a program, as it is still relatively underplayed, decades after its less than welcoming initial reception. Coming shortly after Poulenc's second conscription (World Wars I and II), it is full of a dark intensity that seems to have more kinship with Shostakovich than with Poulenc's prior works. Poulenc was also breaking out of a stylistic mold in a sense (having written that "the violin prima donna over the piano arpeggio makes me vomit"), but his end result in this sonata was a profound work of collaborative expressiveness – and equal challenge for both instruments. The Huang-Chen duo lit into the stormy first movement with intense drive. Ms. Huang's tone was ravishing in its lyrical sections (especially the slower theme in 12/8), and the duo felt its passionate outpourings exactly together. The central *Intermezzo* (prefaced by García Lorca's line, "the guitar makes dreams cry") was movingly melancholic, shaded with otherworldly hues and *sur la touche* timbres. The violin part at times served chiefly to react to the piano part via poignant pizzicato (again, Poulenc's break from the typical virtuoso role) but when it had long lines, Ms. Huang let it sing magnificently. Again, in every moment, the duo

played as if they were of one mind. They concluded the *tragico* last movement brilliantly, projecting its rather abrupt ending with meaning and intensity.

Beethoven's Violin Sonata No. 1 in D major, Op. 12 opened the second half in a brighter spirit. Composed in 1798, the sonata already reflects some of the innovation heard in some of his most beloved creations (such as the amazing Op. 10 for piano from around the same time), and the two players dove into it with vigor. There was much to love about this duo's interpretation of the work, including the especially jauntily placed offbeats and *sforzandi* in the Rondo. Occasionally, though, to this listener there seemed to be some eccentric anomalies, such as very early in the first movement, where a sudden *piano* after the first crescendo was prefaced with what seemed an excessive pause each time; all in all, though, their reading was a joy.

Following the Beethoven, the stage personnel came on to remove the violinist's stand (which had held alternately paper or digital scores for the entire recital) in advance of three solo violin pieces entitled *Blue/s Forms* by Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson (1932-2004). Playing from memory, Ms. Huang showed complete immersion in these pieces, reflecting what she described in her notes as "a personal mission to center the voices of those excluded from the traditional Eurocentric canon." Perkinson's music is experiencing something of a rediscovery of late, but there is a considerable way to go, so kudos to Ms. Huang for acting on her commitment to these pieces. *Plain Blue/s* announced its blues inspiration with major-minor alternations, slides, and syncopation, and Ms. Huang seemed to savor it all. *Just Blue/s* descended into a more plaintive rumination and was hypnotic in Ms. Huang's hands. *Jettin' Blue/s* brought the set to an exciting close with a driving perpetual motion.

Continuing to the inspiration behind Mr. Perkinson's first name, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor himself, Ms. Huang rejoined Ms. Chen for *Deep River* (from *24 Negro Melodies*, arranged from the solo piano version by Maud Powell). A concert version of one of the best-known spirituals, it was lavished with rolls and slides and given a soulful performance by both performers.

For the finale of the concert, we heard the showpiece *Sunshine on Tashkurgan* by Chen Gang (b. 1935). Inspired, we are told, by Tajik music, the basic material reminded this listener of some of the folk music Franz Liszt enjoyed elaborating on – as did Sarasate, Monti, and others in the violin world. From its improvisatory introduction to its dance of frenzied speed, Ms. Huang gave it a high-voltage run with Ms. Chen, in a dazzling pyrotechnical display. The piece seemed made for them, though we know it was composed in 1976 (and quite popular since then in China).

After a standing ovation came two unannounced encores – first Tchaikovsky's well-known *Mélodie* from Op. 42, a sentimental farewell, and then *Black Gypsy* by Eddie South (1904-1962) – played winningly. The Eddie South piece eluded me at first, with its expressive classical-jazz blend and fiddle-like riffs. What was this vaguely familiar gem? (We reviewers may

retain a lot, but we're not infallible.) A quick review of some Augustin Hadelich performances jogged the memory, and there it was, Eddie South. One couldn't help thinking though – even though many feel encores are a fun surprise unannounced – that it could help still further the mission to “amplify marginalized voices” if their names were announced!

Incidentally, as the name Augustin Hadelich sprang to mind, so did the recollection that he was also a winner of the International Violin Competition of Indianapolis back in 2006 – a reminder of just how stellar this competition's laureates have been and what a launching pad this competition has been. As we celebrate Ms. Huang, the most recent of their stars, we look forward similarly to following her adventures and explorations for years to come.

by [Rorianne Schrade](#) for New York Concert Review; New York, NY

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