

Chinese classical guitarist Xuefei Yang talks exclusively to C Music TV about her introduction to the guitar, her passions and her future ambitions.

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Transcribed by Claire Thomas at C Music TV

C Music TV, Mark Forrest: So Xuefei Yang welcome to C Music TV, great to see you.

Great to see you again, I'm so happy to be here.

Can I start by asking you to go back in time and if you can, tell me about your very first musical memory?

Probably when I was about 3 years or so and I was dancing on the bed and then I dropped off it and my parents gasped but I was ok, that was probably my earliest memory.

And was music something that surrounded you in your house? Were your parents musical?

There aren't any musicians in my family but my parents both liked music and would always have the radio on. At that time we didn't have a TV so they listened to music all the time so I guess I was surrounded by music, but I wasn't from a musical family.

So how did it come about that you were given music lessons?

It was really fate, I feel like it was the guitar that chose me rather than me choosing the guitar because this instrument was a real novelty in China. Especially because I was born shortly after the Cultural Revolution during which time Western instruments and Western music were banned and the guitar was regarded as a hooligan's instrument. My parents are both teachers so you would think that a teacher's daughter playing guitar would seem a bit weird, that she should play a nice instrument, and 'not very nice people' play guitar. So it was very unusual for me. I was very

energetic and my parents wanted to calm me down by learning an instrument but they were thinking of the accordion because this was a very popular instrument at the time. They spoke to the music teacher in my primary school and she said because I was 7 years old I was too young to hold a heavy instrument. She loved guitar and she was organising a guitar group, like a kids choir to have guitar to accompany so she suggested my parents put me in the guitar group. So my parents decided for me that I was going to learn the guitar and they bought a little guitar for me and that was the first time I saw the instrument. I remember I kept asking my mum 'What's this instrument called?' I didn't even know the name of this instrument! So now looking back it really seems like it was fate. But with all the knowledge I have now of instruments if I could chose again I would still choose the guitar.

What it is then that is so special about the guitar?

I think the intimacy, for me I think the guitar is probably the most intimate instrument because you have to use your limbs to hold the guitar and you have to use your flesh to pluck the strings but not like piano which is quite mechanical. With a stringed instrument you have to use a bow to play it but when you use your flesh to play it's very close to your heart and you hold it as if it were a close friend or even a partner. Also it's portable, you can take it anywhere you don't need an accompanist to play you can just play on your own. And it's a very attractive instrument; I can take the guitar to the beach or on holiday so it feels like an old time partner.

So you're 7 years old and your parents have chosen the guitar, but at what stage did you realise that the guitar could be your life or your career?

A few years later, I don't remember the particular moment but I do remember that from the beginning I enjoyed it very much and when I was 9 or 10 years old I played in an American master class and I was the only kid. All of the adults said 'This child is very talented' and this American guitarist said that if I had a good teacher then I could be a first class guitarist. So that was the first time the idea of being a guitarist entered my mind. Later on when there were more performances people kept saying it so I thought 'I want to be a guitarist'. But of course at that time I had no idea what it meant to be a professional musician. When I was 12 my teacher told me that if I wanted to be a professional musician I had to go to a Conservatoire to study but my parents didn't want me to. I had to fight with them and at moment I felt very clearly that this was what I wanted to do.

How did you persuade your parents that this was the right thing to do?

It's a bit difficult because at that moment I wasn't happy, I thought my parents weren't supportive, but now looking back I understand. At that time I was offered a place in the best school in China that would've guaranteed me to go to a top university and afterwards a good job. But in the Conservatoire there wasn't a guitar faculty yet so my parents had to pay lots of money in extra fees for me to go and study without getting a degree because there wasn't a faculty. Also at that time, after your graduation you would be assigned a job so as a strings player or a keyboard player you could go to an orchestra or an opera house or a company or to teach but as a guitarist there was no place where they could give you a job. So it was really risky, but I guess I was very young and I thought 'I love playing guitar' and maybe my character is a bit, you know I don't want to do the normal thing. I felt that I loved music and I just wanted to be a musician and my parents didn't want

me to do it. I guess I didn't think too much about the risk or about the future I thought I just want to do it. But now looking back I understand my parents.

[What was it like at the Conservatoire when there was no guitar faculty, were you the only guitarist?](#)

The first year I was the only one, I remember when I was offered the sort of special place in the middle school attached to the Conservatoire and in the summer holidays I was so excited. I thought I was going to be with all those other instrumentalists, but when I entered right up until the last year I felt really frustrated because in my class there were all kinds of instruments including Western and Chinese and they could play in an orchestra or a Chinese orchestra, or play chamber music. These all have a long tradition in the Conservatoire and I was the only one who played guitar and also the teachers and the students looked down on the guitar. I remember very vividly there was a violinist classmate of mine 'Can a guitarist play in a concert hall?' And I remember on the same floor there was a violin making student and he said 'Oh, guitar is so easy, I can make you one tomorrow'. There was lots of prejudice with people thinking that guitar is not a serious instrument; it's cheap and easy to play. All these things made me really frustrated, but at the same time it strengthened my power and I wanted to show them what a guitar can do, that the guitar is a beautiful instrument. I was in the Conservatoire for 10 years so in the 5th year they set up a formal guitar faculty and at that time there were a few students in the middle school but I was the first one to graduate with the BA degree. But even then there were teachers who'd say 'Ooh guitar..? What can you play?' And this prejudice surrounded me all the time.

[So 10 years in the Conservatoire, you've come against a lot of prejudice and you're 23 years old at this point and you took a decision to leave China and move to London. Take me through that decision.](#)

I actually had this thought when I was about 14 or 15 years old because I started playing abroad and I thought I wanted to go abroad to study because there wasn't a tradition for classical guitar in China. I thought about either going to the USA or Europe but in my mind I always preferred Europe because I admired the culture and the large variety of culture and I think classical music has a longer history in Europe. London is one of the cultural centres of the world and for me I wanted not only to go somewhere to study playing guitar with a teacher but I wanted to go somewhere where they had lots of things going on. Somewhere where I could be inspired by the environment, that's why I finally chose London.

[Tell me about your first concert because you mentioned that you'd been playing in public for quite some time. Can you remember the very first time that you played outside of college when you got to play for an audience?](#)

It must have been quite young actually; I attended some amateur shows and competitions so probably the earliest was when I was about 8 or 9 with the guitar group I played guitar solos and guitar trio and even singing! But I think the first memorable public performance was when I was 10 which was at an international guitar festival in China where I met lots of guitarists from abroad and I got lots of praise. That was the moment when I felt like I really wanted to be a guitarist because people were saying it!

Tell me about some of the famous guitarists you've met who have been influential on your career.

I would say that the most influential person would be John Williams because when I was a kid we didn't have lots of recordings to listen to, there was John Williams, Julian Bream, Segovia – these masters have lots of recordings so we copied them on tapes. So he was my hero already and he came to China to perform and to give a master class in the central conservatoire and I went and played for him so that was unbelievable. He was very encouraging and that encouragement came at a rather difficult time for me so it was really important for me.

Tell me about the way your career has progressed because you've mentioned good times and bad times. What caused the bad times, why did you feel like it was going to be tough to do what you wanted to do?

It's hard to explain, ok when I was very young I didn't think about the risk or the difficulty I just wanted to play guitar and then when I was a little bit older in college I started to think about the future and what I should do after graduation and in China there weren't lots of opportunities to play. So I wasn't sure what I should do in the future but I thought very clearly that I wanted to go abroad to study but again this was problematic. Sometimes I even wondered if I should continue or not but of course I never wanted to give up playing the guitar but I hesitated about pursuing as a profession.

So what was the changing point? Was it getting a recording contract, was it moving to London? What happened that told you 'Yes I can make this my life'?

When I finally made it to London and I studied first and was I just there to open my eyes to this new place but I think it was the love of music that made me not give up.

How difficult it is? I'm sure there are many young people watching you on television at the moment thinking 'I would love to have a career like that and a record contract'.

I think I'm really lucky to have all these opportunities, when I was a teenager I could never have imagined that I would have this career with a major record label with a big agency, playing more than 50 concerts around the world a year! It's kind of unbelievable. With any kind of success there are multiple factors- you need to have talent for sure, and you need to work hard, you need to be lucky definitely and of course you need passion, that's the most important thing. That's why I think looking back now that's why I kept playing guitar through all the difficulties, because of my passion for it.

You've just recorded what is for many guitarists the most loved concerto in the repertoire the Rodrigo Concierto de Aranjuez. Tell me about the recording of this, how special was it for you this chance to put your interpretation of this onto disc?

Very special, actually when I was a teenager I dreamt that one day if I could record 3 discs for EMI and I was thinking of them already I don't know why, I would be satisfied, then I could something else maybe. But now of course I want to do more recordings. So I feel really fortunate to have this opportunity to record the concerto for EMI and I would say that the Concierto de Aranjuez is the most famous guitar concerto. But not only is it the best known one but it's also the best concerto so far at least. It's so emotional and so beautiful, so strong and I had played it many times so I felt ready to record it.

Tell me where you went to record it?

I went to Barcelona to record it because two years ago when I was performing with the Barcelona Symphony Orchestra we were already thinking about recording Albeniz' music. Albeniz was a Catalan hero and the Barcelona Symphony Orchestra is the national Catalan orchestra so I thought they it would be ideal to record with them. So, I talked to their manager and put them in contact with EMI and they were very happy to do the recording too. Also I found out that they were the equivalent orchestra who premiered the Aranjuez exactly 70 years ago in Barcelona so I thought 'Wow, that's interesting'. So finally it has happened and I think they're wonderful and the principal conductor is very inspiring and you can feel the passion of the orchestra especially when they're doing Catalan composer's music.

What would your advice be to young people watching C Music TV who want to pursue a career in music?

My advice to young people who are watching C Music TV right now would be to love what you do and keep doing what you love doing and enjoy the process, don't think too much about the result or being famous but just keep doing it.

Tell me about life on the road because you do more than 50 concerts a year.

Well it is tiring to travel all the time but also it's very interesting for me because I love travelling, I love to go to a new place, seeing a different culture and meeting different people and I find it very fascinating. Of course sometimes on the road I feel lonely and tired and homesick but when I go back home I feel like I want to tour again! Yes, I love travelling and so far I've been to more than 40 countries it's really inspiring and it inspires me musically too when you play music from other countries. It's important to go to the country to feel the culture there especially playing Spanish music .

And do you take your computer for facebook and Skype to keep in contact with friends and family?

I find that quite hard actually, I feel like the most important thing for me is focusing on my music and I need lots of rest so I make sure I focus on the music first. And then when I have time I will email and keep in touch with people.

And if you get ever have the chance to C Music TV, can I ask what you think of the channel?

I think it's a fantastic because nowadays we need more media that promote classical music so I'm really happy to see a channel like C Music TV. Also nowadays with the whole digital media, online things means people have more choice you can use the internet to find about the things you like. 20 or 30 years ago you wouldn't have so much choice. I think it's great what the channel is doing.

What other ambitions do you still have, now that you've recorded the Concierto de Aranjuez?

I already have a long list of the repertoire I want to record and to transcribe so there are lots of things that I want to do but I have to think about the priority. I think my next project which I'm talking about with EMI is likely to be a Baroque album and it's going to be something interesting, but you'll have to keep an eye out!

Do you do your own transcriptions? Tell me about that process, because this isn't that much repertoire written for guitar so many guitarists transcribe music written for other instruments.

In fact I don't quite agree that guitar doesn't have a big repertoire I think we do have a big repertoire, it's enough for me to play in my life but we have like our own repertoire. As a composer, the reason why big composers like Beethoven, Chopin, and Brahms never wrote a single piece for guitar was because they couldn't play. You have to be able to play a little bit of an instrument and then you are able to write for that instrument. So we have lots of composers who are guitarist composers so we have a different repertoire. But of course there is a lot of repertoire by mainstream composers that we can arrange with our knowledge of playing the instrument so therefore lots of guitarists do the transcriptions. For me at my level I like to do my own transcriptions because I can look through the original score and really understand what's going on and make it the way I want. So most of the time I make my own transcriptions unless I play a jazz arrangement or a folk arrangement, then I would play someone else's. I suggest that for high level guitarists it's important to go through the original score before you play any arrangements. In this new album I arranged a whole suite by Isaac Albeniz as you know he wrote mainly for piano but he often thought about the sound of the guitar and put the sound of the guitar in his piano works. So when his piano works are transcribed back to the guitar sometimes they sound more authentic. Apparently even Albeniz himself said that he liked his music played on the guitar better. So this transcription is possibly the first recording on the solo guitar.

So you're expanding the guitar repertoire?

Well just to follow the great guitarist's path you know, it was started by Segovia who needed more repertoire so he encouraged the big composers in his time to write.

And if you could choose any composer alive or dead to write a concerto for you, who would you choose?

There are many but immediately I would think Chopin because his music is very romantic and he wrote a lot of miniatures too which would suit the guitar. Actually I transcribed some as well and I think he could have done some beautiful concertos for the guitar.

What about those who are alive today?

I saw the interview on C Music TV with John Rutter and I think it would be great if he could write something for the guitar because he's a great composer and a great person.

Now you are surrounded by music every day, what is it about music that is so special to you?

Music is something that you can't express with language; you can only express it in music. Therefore we need music in life; it's a reflection of human beings thoughts and emotions and you can only express this through music. I cannot imagine our life without music.

We've talked a lot about guitar music but what music do you like to listen to outside your core guitar repertoire?

Well I listen to all sorts of music; I think it's important to be open minded as a musician. I like to listen to jazz for relaxation especially at night time but when I play a lot I like to have silence too! But when I listen to music I don't put on guitar music.

Do you have time for other interests?

Yes I have many interests but I have to make priorities, like learning improvisation and learning compositions so they're still related to the guitar. Also I want to learn other languages. Actually I thought that maybe if I didn't play guitar professionally I'd like to be a designer or a director of something. Like a TV director or something creative like that.

So do you watch TV and films?

Yes I do, when I'm on the plane I usually watch movies to catch up because I don't go to the cinema. I like romantic movies, or documentaries, sometimes things like 'Pride and Prejudice'. I saw Alice in Wonderland recently I like this kind of thing.

And what about family, do you ever get to see your family?

Yes my parents are in Beijing and my brother is in New York so my family is very spread out so it's hard.

And how do you find any time for a personal life?

Oh I have yes, and for me I think I'm quite a balanced person. I love making music and playing but I must have a life.

How easy is it to make friends when you're working so hard?

Sometimes I think if I had the opportunity to do 100 concerts a year I wouldn't do it because I feel like I need a life I need that space to inspire me for my music. I always find time to do other things and talk to my friends. For me it's very important to have a life. That is the inspiration for my music making. As I grow older I feel my music making is a reflection of my life.

And what about marriage, are you married?

No but I have a partner.

So let's talk about the rest of the year and what you have planned?

I'm actually off to China tomorrow night to play in the big concert halls over there and then I'll be playing in Germany, Switzerland, Italy and in the UK. In the beginning of next year I'm playing in Dublin Aranjuez and also with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic who I premiered the new concerto I recorded on my disc. So it's really exciting and the new recording is out now and you can find it on Amazon, in HMV, iTunes so I hope the audience will like it. It's a big ambition for me, I was always sure that I would make this recording but the biggest challenge is that there are already many

recordings of Aranjuez. So I hope my rendition will stay there for a long time because I think I've brought something new to the piece.

[And how do you feel now when you listen to the recording?](#)

I never feel relaxed when I listen to my own recordings; I actually don't play my recordings at all. But now I feel like I should play my recordings more often because I can learn something from it. And now when I listen back to this new recording of course it reflects the best moments I had, at least in July when I was making it. But I've performed a few times afterwards already and I feel a little bit different again and I'm looking forward to my next chance to record the same piece again. You have to regard the recording as a certain moment. That's the fascinating thing about music making- that it's not fixed like a painting but it's always evolving with your new experiences with the environment. Even with things like YouTube and online TV you still need to go to the live concerts. But I still think that this recording is my best so far. Of course I'm proud of all of them, the ones I've done previously with Forty Degrees North where I recorded some of the new Chinese music alongside Spanish and the first one 'Romance de Amor 'is a collection of the classic guitar repertoire from 3 continents. So I'm proud of them all. But I'm very thankful to have had the opportunity to record with EMI because you know as I told you earlier as a little girl I dreamt of recording with EMI.