Once again, I am breaking my own self-appointed mandate of live performance reviews to review a new recording. There's no justification, other than to say that I've been following the career of the musicians involved – the Cheng²Duo – for some years now with considerable interest.

Violonchelo del fuego ("Cello of Fire") is the eye-catching title of this new release from the German label Audite. The cover photos underline the Spanish pedigree of the music we'll be hearing.

Unlike the Duo's initial recording, this one contains only one work originally written for the ensemble of cello and piano. It matters not, for the music is all performed with as much fire and passion as if it were specifically composed with these instruments in mind. This new release also includes works for solo piano and solo cello, another innovation on record for these fine Canadian artists.

This Spanish recital constitutes a whirlwind tour through the great Spanish/Catalan music renaissance during the first half of the last century. It might be called a "Greatest Spanish Hits" compilation, but only in part since some of the works definitely live at the rarely-heard edges of the repertoire. As well, there is one work – the final one on the CD – which is something of an odd number since it is only Spanish by virtue of the nationality of its composer, certainly not in any stylistic way.

Traditional images of the music of Spain often evoke such comparisons as the strumming and plucking of guitars, the stamping of flamenco dancers' feet, and the clacking of castanets. To capture this feeling on instruments such as cello and piano requires the most precise pedalling and playing of staccato (on piano) and pizzicato (on cello), combined with rapid articulation, plenty of freedom of rhythm, and sudden, sharp dynamic contrasts. But these composers also included many pages of melting lyrical beauty, where the needs shift to sustained legato and careful shaping of phrases.

In all these respects and others, Silvie Cheng (piano) and Bryan Cheng (cello) have entirely captured the voices of these composers, and they've done so with energy, verve, and spirit.
From the very first notes of the opening number, the Intermezzo from the opera Goyescas by Enrique Granados, it's plain that we're in a very different musical world from the one which the Cheng²Duo's previous recording explored. Later in the recording, we encounter Granados again in an arrangement of perhaps his best-known composition, the Andaluza, fifth movement of his twelve Spanish Dances for piano. This is one work where I noted especially the difference in colour of the whole as the melody was taken by the cello in a position in the centre of the harmony, where it originally appeared on the top. This gave the entire dance a more autumnal feeling.

Isaac Albeniz, the most redoubtable of all Spanish composers for the piano, appears for only one work here, but it's a delight: the Malaguena from his suite Espana. This work calls for a lighter texture and colour, and the Duo deliver, finding a real sense of fantasy in this beautiful number.

The music of Manuel de Falla is generously represented. The first Spanish Dance from his opera La vida breve opens with an energetic presentation of the main theme. The central slower section brings the most forceful bass notes on piano, again with matching powerhouse pizzicato playing on the cello. The return of the main theme is decorated in this arrangement with additional virtuosic flourishes, all played with great flair and verve.

Equally powerful, if anything even more vivid and dramatic, is the famous Ritual Fire Dance from de Falla's ballet El amor brujo. Especially impressive here is the very wide dynamic range of the playing as the music leaps instantly from the very quiet throbbing rhythm to a full-throated fortissimo.

For a microcosm of the entire musical world of this record, turn to de Falla's Seven Popular Spanish Songs. From the fleet-footed Seguidilla murciana and Jota to the languorous Asturiana and the serene beauty of Nana, the Cheng²Duo capture all the diverse moods of this masterly cycle. In such a performance, one scarcely misses the words. The passionate Polo, with its stabbing chords on the piano and leaping cello line is a highlight of the entire album.

Silvie Cheng plays Turina's Exaltacion with distinction, the dream-like opening giving place to a vigorous treatment of the main theme and a lighter, more fantastic tone for the central section. It's a pity that room wasn't found to include the other two Fantastic Dances, as these pieces are not heard on record nearly often enough.

Bryan Cheng presents a rare and significant Suite for solo cello by cellist/composer Gaspar Cassadó, a work which not only deserves but demands wider currency. Three movements, each inspired by different traditional dance forms, call for the widest range of tone colours and moods, and this thoughtful performance truly captures that diversity.

Another Cassadó rarity follows, Requiebros (“Flirtations” or “Compliments”) for cello and piano – another dance, this time somewhat more popular in character, and played by the Duo with panache. For a more detailed look at this music by Cassadó, go to my rare music blog: Cello Beauties From Spain.

The final selection is the odd number, the famous Zigeunerweisen by Pablo de Sarasate, one of the staples of the violin repertoire. The central-European gypsy atmosphere of this piece contrasts oddly with the authentic voices of Spain heard in the rest of the album. What's most striking here is the absolute clarity and precision
of Bryan Cheng's virtuoso fireworks on the cello, since the notes are much farther apart than on a violin and the cellist's hand has to race back and forth twice as quickly along the fingerboard!

Taken as a whole, this new recording presents a distinguished survey of that proud and magnificent Spanish musical renaissance of the early twentieth century. Silvie and Bryan Cheng fill every selection with the fire and passion which are so essential to this music.

Audite's recording team has captured all the precision and energy of the playing with great clarity, set against a nicely resonant backdrop. A word of warning though: turn your volume down before you play this recording – it has been transferred at a very high level. The album includes detailed and informative programme notes in German, English, and French.
Fire and Passion

Once again, I am treating my own self-appointed mandate of fine performance music to review a new recording. There's no publication, other than in the way I have been following the careers of the musicians involved - the Chopin/Du - for some years now with considerable interest.

Vocalismo del Sacramento "Cats of Fire" is the eye-catching title of this new release from the German label Audite. The cover photos underscore the Spanish patheges the music will have here.

Unlike the Du's initial recording, the one contains only one very expertly written for the ensemble of cello and piano. It matters not, for the music is all performed with as much fire and passion as if it were specifically composed with these instruments in mind. This new rendition also includes works for solo piano and solo cello, another innovation on record for these fire Canadian artists.

This Spanish rendition introduces a white-hot theme throughout the great (Saragossa: Harimau music) rendition during the first half of the last century. It might recall a "Spanish Shinto" composition, but only in part since none of the works are actually due at the temporary edges of the repertoire. As well, there is one work is, the first one on the CD is, something of an odd number since it is only Spanish by virtue of the nationality of its composer, certainly not in any stylistic way.

Traditional images of the music of Spain often revolve such competencies as the strumming and plucking of guitar, the playing of flamenco drums, and the creasing of castanets. To capture this feeling on instruments such as cello and piano requires the most precise articulation and styles of execution (for piano) and portato (on cello) combined with rapid articulation, plenty of twangs of rhythm, and sudden, sharp dynamic contrasts. But these components also included many pages of maling lyrical beauty, where the music shifts to sustained legato and smooth flowing of phrases.

In all these respects and others, Shiho Cheng (piano) and Bryan Cheng (cello) have enthrall captured the voices of these composers, and they've done so with energy, voice, and spirit.

Promote very favorable of the opening number, the Improviso from the piano Chelston by Etienne Grechaniak, is an idea that are in a very different musical world from the one which the Chopin/Du has previously recorded. Later in the recording, we encounter Sardana again in an arrangement of perhaps the best-known composition, the Andalucia, fifth movement of his first Largo Dances for piano. This is a work which is noted especially the difference in the music is the melody was taken for the cello is in a position in the center of the harmony, where it originally appeared on the top. This gives the entire dance a more autumnal feeling.

Lazar Abrahams, the most notable of all Spanish composers for the piano, appears for only one work here, but it is a bright and bold interlude from his suite Zephyrus. This work calls for a lighter touch and color, and the Du deliver, finding a real area of lightness in this beautiful number.

The music of Manuel de Falla is generously represented. The first Spanish Dancer from his suite La vida breve opens with an infectious presentation of the main theme. The central slow section brings the most forthright basic forms on piano, again with matching power which is also played on the cello. The music of the main theme is developed in this arrangement with additional virtuosic fantasy, all played with great flair and finesse.

Squally powerfully, is nothing more exciting and dramatic than the famous "Spanish Fire Dance" from the ballet, ballets of Jemmer Kajun. Especially impressive here is the very wide dynamic range from piano on the cello. They achieve a fully the very rapid, thematic full-blooded fantasy.

For a microcosm of the entire musical world of the record, turn to the de Falla's Seven Popular Spanish Dances From the Four-footed Seville to maqueradante and vista is the impresionistic fantasies and other in the heroes, the Chopin/Du capture all the diverse moods of the melody cycle. In such a performance, one can acquire the repertoire. The Passacaglia, with its simple character on the piano and cello brings the main theme of the fourth of the entire album.

Shiho Cheng plays Tchaikovsky's Exposition, with dedication, the short-duet opening going place to a rigorous treatment of the main theme and is a lighter, more fantastic form for the central section. The piano that more wasn't found to include the other two Fantastic Dances, as these pieces are not heard on record near it often enough.

Bryan Cheng presents a rare and significant Suite for solo cello by fellow composer César Caudel, a work which not only deserves but demands wider exposure. Three movements, each treated by different traditional dance forms, offer the varied range of tone colors and moods, and the thoughts of performance truly captivate that diversity.

Another Caudel, sextet followed, Pasacalles ("Procession" or "Comediant") for cello and piano - another dance, this time somewhat more popular in character, and played by the Duan with precision. For a more detailed look at this music by Caudel, go to the new music blog "Negro Desafio" from Audite.

The final selection is the old number, the famous "Spanish Dances" from the ballet of Seville to enliven the repertoire. The central European group of chamber music contrasts with the atypical voices of Spain heard in the rest of the album. What's next shining here is the electrocity and precision of Bryan Cheng's virtuoso execution of the cello, since the notes are much further apart than on a violin and the cello's head on to more note and very much acoustically along the -

Taken as a whole, this new recording presents a distinguished survey of that proud and magnificent Spanish musical range at the early twentieth century. Shiho and Bryan Cheng make every selection with the fire and passion which are so essential to these music.

Audite's recording team has captured both, precision and energy of the playing with great care, and against a nicely recorded background. A sort of working though turn your volume down before you play this recording - it has been transformed at a very high level. The album includes detailed and informative programme notes in German, English, and French.