

CLASSY SOUNDS FROM A GOLDEN AGE



Violinist Ray Chen has just released a new album where he interprets celebrated pieces with his signature flair and ingenuity, **Chen Nan** reports.

Violinist Ray Chen performs at the Beijing Concert Hall on June 10. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

The alarm rings. Violinist Ray Chen opens his eyes and gets up from his bed. After getting dressed, he says: "Today is a special day!" This is how a video which Chen directed unfolds.

The video was made in Barcelona a week before his new album, *The Golden Age*, came out on June 8.

For the 29-year-old from Taiwan, interacting with his fans through videos is fun. So far, he has released over 100 self-produced videos, combining comedy with music via social media.

Speaking about the videos, he says: "I want to show fans, especially the young generation, that classical music can be fun."

It's been four years since Chen released a new album. Before this new album, he released three albums through Sony.

In *The Golden Age*, his first recording with Decca Classics since signing with the label last year, Chen features a selection of works, which celebrate the "golden age" of the violin — not only in terms of repertoire, but also in terms of performance style and ingenuity.

Instead of making a recording, which is "simply sticking a microphone in a room or hall and trying to produce the best version of the piece", Chen seeks to create something new in the studio.

"What else can I add to these celebrated pieces, which have been performed by many other great violinists? I won't go into the techniques, but I think you'll find that the sound you hear in the recording is slightly different from what I did before."

The centerpiece of the new album is German composer Max Bruch's

violin concerto, performed with the London Philharmonic Orchestra under the baton of conductor Robert Trevino and recorded last August.

The album also features compositions and arrangements by Austrian violinist Fritz Kreisler and US violinist Jascha Heifetz, which Chen performs with French pianist Julien Quentin.

"The pieces go along with the title *The Golden Age* — a reference to my love for the great violinists of the past, and also as a reference to my own coming of age, and entering what I believe is the next chapter of my life as a musician," says Chen.

The new album opens with a piece called *A New Satisfaction* for a string quartet, which has already garnered over 50,000 hits on Chen's YouTube channel.

It features *Gymnopédie No 1* by

French composer Erik Satie, with an allusion to Italian composer Gioachino Rossini's *William Tell Overture*.

The piece, performed by Chen and his Made in Berlin quartet, is arranged by the group's cellist Stephan Konz.

The other violinist in the quartet is Noah Bendix-Balgley, while Amihai Grosz plays the viola.

All of Chen's collaborators in the group are members of the Berlin Philharmonic and they recorded together in Berlin last November.

Konz has also arranged French composer Claude Debussy's *Clair de Lune* and an Australian folk song, *Waltzing Matilda* for the album.

Chen, who was born in Taiwan and raised in Australia, selected *Waltzing Matilda* for the album as a tribute to his second hometown.

Speaking about what drives his

“My Chinese background and my life in Australia both work on me as a violinist, so there is self-discipline and a laid-back mindset.”

Ray Chen, 29, violinist



Online: To see the video, scan the code.

music, Chen, who was taken to Australia by his parents when he was 4 months old, says: "My Chinese background and my life in Australia both work on me as a violinist, so there is self-discipline and a laid-back mindset."

Chen started learning the violin at the age of 4 and was accepted into the prestigious Curtis Institute of Music at 15, where he studied with American violinist Aaron Rosand.

Speaking about Rosand, now 91, who he visited while making this new album, Chen says: "When I told him that I wanted to bring a kind of intimacy to this new album, he understood me at once. We are still student and teacher."

Despite Chen's talent, his progress as a musician was rocky.

Chen, who was regarded as a child prodigy with "perfect pitch", got his first exposure at 8 years old when he was invited to perform at the opening of the 1998 Nagano Winter Olympics in Japan, his first overseas tour. Then, at 13, he won the National Youth Concerto Competition in Australia, which bolstered his confidence.

But he failed to clear the entrance test when he first applied to join the Curtis Institute of Music.

And his biggest break did not come until he was 19 when he won the 2008 International Yehudi Menuhin Violin Competition and the 2009 Queen Elisabeth Music Competition.

Speaking about that change in his fortunes, Chen says: "Some of the competitors were about 14 or 15, much younger than me, so I had to work hard to catch up. But the success enabled me to look at my career differently."

In 2012, Chen became the youngest soloist to perform at the televised Nobel Prize Concert for the Nobel laureates and the Swedish royal family. And, in 2015, Chen moved to Berlin.

Now, as one of the busiest young violinists in the world, Chen has just wrapped up his tour of China from June 8 to 15, visiting Zhuhai, in Guangdong province, Xi'an, in Shaanxi province, and Suzhou, in Jiangsu province.

As for the future, he is booked up for performances until 2020.

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