

'Anytime we can celebrate multiple cultures and women, we are going to do that'

Multitudes of people stemming from several cultural backgrounds and ethnicities shuffled into Middle Tennessee State University's Hinton Hall for the Spring Dulcimer. Guests were packed in the auditorium seats shoulder to shoulder with their program pamphlets clutched in their hands. When Dr. Mei Han, MTSU's founder of the Center for Chinese Music and Culture, stepped onto the stage to commence the celebration, she was delighted to see so many different colored faces staring back at her, illuminated by the stage lights.

The Spring Dulcimer last night was the first celebration of its kind since COVID-19 halted all live events. A unique celebration of the Chinese New Year, the Spring Dulcimer featured an all-female musician performance that combined Chinese and Western instruments to pay homage to Chinese history. Han stood at the center of the event, guiding the audience and even playing her instrument of choice, the zheng.

Throughout each solo and duet performance during the Spring Dulcimer Han, alternating between Chinese and English, spoke a little about each song and the centuries of history that reside behind them all.

Han has performed in 20 countries spanning over five continents for more than 50 years; She no longer felt that same gnawing nervousness she felt as a young musician. Instead, Han was met with a cool demeanor, carrying confidence and virtuosity.

Han, who has a Ph.D. in Ethnomusicology, is renowned in the music world because of her multiple awards for playing the zheng.

"I have fortunately gained a lot of respect in the international music community, both Chinese and Western, for my work with contemporary Chinese music," Han said after recounting her most recent performance, a sold-out show in Canada.

That's not to say the excitement-induced adrenaline rush wasn't still present during her group performance with visiting scholar Lyujing Liu, who played the hammered dulcimer,

MTSU Music professor Andrea Dawson on the violin and Belmont University pianist Alessandra Volpi. The group played mostly traditional Chinese music with a dash of contemporary elements. The Western instruments, the violin and piano, emphasized the Chinese-American aspect of the celebration.

“Anytime we can celebrate multiple cultures and celebrate women, we are going to do that,” Han said.

The last song performed was the only one that featured every single instrument. As the group plucked out their last few notes, the audience immediately erupted in a standing ovation. The Spring Dulcimer was awarded whistles and cries. Children from the Chinese Center of Music and Culture ran out from the right hand side of the stage with four bouquets, one for each musician. Han, the last to receive flowers, beamed back at the lively crowd with gratitude. She knew that so many attendees had received new knowledge that they likely never would’ve had the chance to if they didn’t attend the performance.

This meant a tremendous amount to her because gaining and sharing knowledge of her culture is one of her biggest passions in life.

“I don’t think enough people realize how big or how old the world really is. We can not be so content with the knowledge that we have,” Han said. “It is so necessary to learn, experience and see more culture in our day to day lives...That is why we seek to create an environment with our performances that lets people know that everyone is welcome. The shows are free. Attending, seeking out what the world has to offer, will always be for their benefit.”