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Lang Lang at the keyboard

Classical pianist Lang Lang rides the Chinese wave

by Piera Anna Franini
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Recognised worldwide as a top pianist and for his cultural influence, classical music star Lang Lang is performing two concerts in Switzerland. On June 26 Lang plays the Grosser Saal del Kultur-Casino in Bern, followed by a second concert the following day at the Victoria Hall in Geneva. Swisster's interview with Lang examines his rise to fame (from humble origins) initially based on a surprising role model.

Pianist Lang Lang was just five years old when he performed his first concert after which his father, a musician, decided that his son would become a soloist.

To convince the child he recounted the story of a film about a famous boxer. "Every day Rocky thinks only of running and working on the punch bag. He lets nothing distract him. Think only of winning." And Lang has triumphed. No pianist under 30 years of age has gained so much popularity.

With his spiky hair, friendly smile, and dynamic energy, the 28-year-old was born in Shenyang, north-east China, and is currently riding the wave of the Asian superpower, after appearing in [Time magazine's 2009 annual list of the 100 Most Influential People in the World](#).

In 2008, over five billion people viewed Lang's performance in Beijing's opening ceremony for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad where he was seen as a symbol of the youth and future of China. On June 26 and 27, Lang will appear at Grosser Saal del Kulture-Casino in Bern and the Victoria Hall in Geneva playing selections from Beethoven, [Albéniz](#) and [Prokofiev](#).

Having arguably achieved greater worldwide recognition than any classical hero since Luciano Pavarotti, Lang has inspired over 35 million Chinese children to learn to play classical piano – a phenomenon coined as "the Lang effect". Concert halls are sprouting around the country like the Tchaikovsky mushrooms in Walt Disney's *Fantasia*.

"I am happy with what is happening in China, there is a lot of excitement, but I'm curious to know how far you can push so much energy," confesses Lang.

Recognizing Lang's powerful cultural influence, in 2008, the Recording Academy named him their Cultural Ambassador to China. More recently, Lang was chosen as an official worldwide ambassador to the 2010 Shanghai Expo.

Physical attributes have also played a major part in his success: Lang's fingers possess amazing dexterity, the result of intensive study and practice implemented at gruelling pace from the age of three, a practice common in China.

At nine years old he moved away from his mother who regularly sent her meagre salary to Beijing where her husband settled to cultivate their prodigious son. Lang's father, Lang Guoping, player of the er-hu instrument, assumed the role of coach.

He was also adviser, cook, and driver of the only transport in their possession – a derelict old bicycle. The pair lived in an impoverished apartment with one toilet shared between four families.

What has it meant to have lived in poverty? "It has taught me to enjoy beautiful things and appreciate them with a sense of proportion. I remember the conductor Yuri Temirkanov recommending me not to forget the apartment in which I spent my childhood. Also, to be grateful to people for what I now have which has enabled me to buy a home in New York and Beijing," he said.

The turning point for Lang occurred on winning several competition gold medals, his transfer to the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia and, as a last minute stand-in at the Ravinia Festival in 1999.

In February, Sony snatched Lang away from Universal with a contract said to be worth around three million dollars. Since releasing his first album in 2003, Lang has regularly topped the classical charts and, on occasion, achieved sales of pop music dimensions.

In a specialist genre where releases generally sell in the hundreds, Lang's works offload hundreds of thousands, a mirror image of China's economy.

"My country runs at very high speed, I would like see a more stable China in the future. What I was heartened to see is that the economic race runs alongside that of the cultural. I am convinced that this vibrant culture can balance the economic challenge," Lang continues.

And what of democracy in China? He diplomatically responds: "I am continuously travelling around the world and do not find that China alone lives with this problem, insofar as elsewhere similar problems are encountered. Certainly, it is not perfect."

It's an uncomfortable question and Lang concludes the interview with his motto: "Believe in yourself and follow your aspirations. One needs to do the things one loves, cultivate it with discipline and self-confidence. Be able to recognise gifted children who often have little self-esteem. Their lack of confidence thwarts their talent and this is a shame."

[Tickets for the Geneva concert](#) were still available at the time of writing.

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