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August 4, 2008

The Olympian; How China's greatest musician will win the Beijing Games.

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SECTION: FACT; Profiles; Pg. 52 Vol. 84 No. 23

LENGTH: 8610 words

Few citizens of the People's Republic stand to benefit more from this summer's Olympic Games, in Beijing, than a young man from the Manchurian city of Shenyang named Lang Lang. The son of a vice cop and a telephone operator, Lang Lang is no athlete—he is as sedentary as a veal calf in a dark shed—but he has prepared for the Games with the intensity of a middle-distance runner and the ecstatic anticipation of a groom. Unless Yao Ming, of the Houston Rockets, leads the Chinese past Kobe Bryant and the Americans to a gold medal, it is Lang Lang, a gifted pianist prone to red silk tuxedos and Lisztian histrionics at the keyboard, who is likeliest to emerge as the Chinese performer most enriched by the Olympics.

Lang Lang, whose everyday outfit is a black T-shirt, a silvery Versace jacket, jeans, and sneakers of his own design, will be a ubiquitous Olympic presence. He has already performed in Tiananmen Square to celebrate the one-year countdown to the Beijing Games, and the talk around the capital is that he will be a focal point of the opening ceremonies. (The program is a closely held secret. But, if Lang does play, one can assume that his costume will tend toward the Elton John circa "Goodbye Yellow Brick Road" end of the sartorial spectrum.) He will attend several high-profile events in the role of international celebrity, and, because he is both engaging and a fluent English speaker, he'll be put to work by the "Today" show. Bookstores will feature his new, as-told-to autobiography, "Journey of a Thousand Miles," and record stores will display his recordings of Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, and Chopin, along with his best-selling album, "Dragon Songs," a compilation of new and traditional Chinese music. Theatres will soon screen "Lang Lang's Song for 2008," an adoring documentary about his life. Perhaps the swiftest way to encapsulate his Olympian presence is to point out that one of the official pandas of the Beijing Games has been named after him.

Lang Lang and his management team, which is based in New York, have been anticipating this moment for at least three years. In the realm of high culture, Lang is China's first crossover star, and the commercial world, foreign and domestic, has responded. He already has endorsement deals with Audi, Montblanc, Sony Electronics, Adidas, and Steinway, and in August he will be seen advertising their wares, on television and on billboards. His musical paean to the virtues of China Merchants Bank is already a staple of CCTV, and, in Shanghai, his face is on the side of hundreds of buses, a smiling endorsement of a mineral water from Tibet. Not long before I met Lang, in June in Beijing, he had been in the States recording a commercial for United Airlines—playing "Rhapsody in Blue" with Herbie Hancock.

"The Olympics are going to raise the profile, there's no doubt," Lang Lang said one day as he was riding to a book signing in downtown Beijing. "Pop stars aren't taking advantage. They aren't famous outside of China."

At twenty-six, Lang Lang is no longer a prodigy. He is a serious and hardworking pianist who has been selling out Carnegie Hall and other major venues for five years. He is charming and unpretentious, though he has a penchant for moony gyrations and emotive expressions that tend to appall his critics. He is perhaps the showiest performer since Vladimir de Pachmann, a Chopin specialist of a century ago who used to milk cows to exercise his fingers and dip each digit in a glass of brandy before recitals. Lang's irreverence is unabashed. One of the most popular clips of Lang Lang on YouTube shows him playing Chopin's "Black Key" étude, Opus 10, No. 5, with an orange. Lang wears so much product in his hair that when he

sways in rapture to his playing his head looks like a porcupine in a typhoon. As a homegrown cultural star, he has the support of a government that is eager to be seen as something more than the world's most enormous market and workplace. "A country like China, which has developed so quickly economically, has to pay attention that it also becomes a civilized country, not just a gigantic national business," the conductor Long Yu told me.

As China's first for-export pianist, Lang Lang enjoys certain advantages. Just as the revolutionary director Sergei Eisenstein was able to call on the Soviet masses to people the crowd scenes of "Battleship Potemkin," the producers of Lang's mythopoetic bio-pic were able to call on workers paid a pittance to drag his grand piano to the ends and heights of the world. "Only in China," as Lang said. In "Lang Lang's Song," you see him play a Steinway on the rocks near the Hukou Cascade, at an unlikely spot on the Great Wall, on an elevated platform overlooking the Huangpu River in Shanghai. J. Lo does not enjoy the same right-of-way in the Bronx that Lang does in China. The city of Beijing granted Lang access to the Temple of Heaven for half a day so that he could play Beethoven's "Emperor" Concerto in solitude at the temple's Yuanqiu altar, where the Chinese emperors once communed with the gods. "I love this shot!" Lang whispered to me one day at the film's premiere in Beijing, as the waters of the Yellow River undulated in the belly curves of his piano.

Lang Lang is a superb, evolving musician, but he does not earn the money he does because he is better than, say, Maurizio Pollini, Martha Argerich, or, in truth, a dozen others. He earns it because of his shiny novelty and flair, and, perhaps especially, because he is an avatar of the Chinese ascendance. His rewards, by classical standards, are impressive. In the past several years, Lang has averaged a hundred and twenty-five concerts a year, and he usually gets fifty thousand dollars for a recital. His fee for a private corporate concert can be five times that, or more. "If you do five of those in a year, you've made enough to live on," he said. His records sell up to two hundred thousand copies-"peanuts for a pop star, but good for classical." The Olympics, he said, "can't hurt with fees, and my negotiating power to promote classical music will get better, too." His entrepreneurial role model, he said, is Tiger Woods. Lang's commercial potential, especially in China, is such that his lawyers are trademarking his name-it appears on programs as "Lang Lang ." His signature, which he fashions into the curvy shape of a piano, is also protected by Chinese law. "Lang Lang is a good name," he said, "but it's also a real name."

Thirty-five years ago, in the wake of Ping-Pong diplomacy and Henry Kissinger's secret visit to Beijing, the Philadelphia Orchestra, under the direction of Eugene Ormandy, was invited to perform in Beijing and Shanghai-a landmark moment in Chinese cultural history. This June, the orchestra, under the direction of the German-born conductor Christoph Eschenbach, returned to China to commemorate the breakthrough, and Lang Lang signed on to be the soloist for the Grieg Piano Concerto and "The Yellow River Piano Concerto," a staple performance piece of the Cultural Revolution.

"That event was just as complicated and important as the New York Philharmonic going to Pyongyang this year," Lang Lang said as we headed toward a rehearsal with the Philadelphians in Beijing. "When the Philadelphia Orchestra came here to Beijing thirty-five years ago, the Cultural Revolution was still going on, but Eugene Ormandy came anyway. It was a huge experience for us Chinese. My parents had all sorts of relatives affected deeply by the Cultural Revolution, and they were affected, too. The Philadelphia Orchestra concert in 1973 was the first cultural manifestation of the West."

At the start of the Cultural Revolution, in 1966, Mao Zedong banned nearly all Western classical music as a feudal vestige of bourgeois society. Composers, conductors, musicians, and teachers were commonly branded "counter-revolutionaries" and sent to reeducation camps. Some were imprisoned or tortured, others beaten and made to recant. At least seventeen conservatory professors, their family members, and students committed suicide. Along with hundreds of others in the cultural elite, Ma Sicong, the head of the Central Conservatory, was locked in the grounds of the Communist Party School in Beijing, where he was made to read Mao's works, clean toilets, haul rocks, and compose odes of self-rebuke. Because his name means "horse," Ma was forced to eat grass; the Red Guards also beat him in the head with a plank studded with nails. Twice each day, the prisoners were forced to sing "The Howling Song":

I am an ox-ghost and snake demon. I am guilty, I am guilty. I committed crimes against the people. . . . If I speak or act without permission, May you beat me and smash me. Beat me and smash me.

A central figure in the Cultural Revolution was Jiang Qing, Madame Mao, who became a kind of empress of the arts, suppressing Tchaikovsky, Debussy, and Schoenberg and other traces of foreign influence, and ordering the creation of new, proletarian versions of traditional operas and musical compositions. "Today, even in Afghanistan and Iraq and Iran, you can watch television and learn at least something about what is going on in the country," Long Yu said. "In those days, in China, no one had any idea at all."

Although the Cultural Revolution was not yet spent when Richard Nixon came to China, in 1972, the diplomatic initiative was the regime's priority, and Mao's premier, Zhou Enlai, made it possible for the Philadelphia Orchestra to come the following year. Madame Mao was pleased that Ormandy had added to the program "The Yellow River Concerto," a piece composed at her command by a committee of Party-approved musicians. The concerto, according to one member of the committee, the pianist Yin Chengzong, was meant to reflect "Chairman Mao's concept of people's war," and incorporates the

melody from "The East Is Red" and the Communist anthem, the "Internationale." The *Times* critic Harold Schonberg, who went to China with the Philadelphia Orchestra, called it "movie music . . . a rehash of Rachmaninoff, Khachaturian, late romanticism, bastardized Chinese music and Warner Brothers climaxes"; members of the Philadelphia Orchestra referred to it as "The Yellow Fever Concerto." Madame Mao also said that she would permit the orchestra to play Beethoven, but only up to a point. Nicholas Platt, an American diplomat who acted as a liaison between the Chinese government and the orchestra, learned that she insisted on Beethoven's Sixth Symphony, the "Pastoral," but Ormandy, upon landing in Shanghai, told Platt that he would play the Third, the Fifth, the Seventh-but not the Sixth. Caught between a maniacal host and an imperious maestro, Platt extended the art of negotiating to the breaking point: "I told Ormandy, 'This government came to power with a peasant revolution. This is Beethoven's pastoral symphony. Peasants love the pastoral, they love nature. They love program music. This is Beethoven's one piece of program music.' I said, 'The fourth movement has a storm in it and the fifth movement is peaceful and this Communist Party leadership is peaceful.' Now, I was totally making it up. Finally, Ormandy said, 'O.K., we're in Rome, I'll do as the Romans do.' "

Even though the Philadelphians had not brought the music for the Sixth, the Chinese managed to get parts from the Central Philharmonic orchestra. But there was a last hurdle. "Ormandy had told us that he didn't like Chinese food," Platt said. "He wanted his wife, Gretel, to cook chicken breasts and steaks for him in their room. I said, 'I understand you don't like Chinese food, but here in China all social life revolves around the table. You don't have to really eat anything, but you do have to show up.' Well, he showed up the first night and he *loved* the food."

Lang Lang arrived at the Cultural Palace of Nationalities, the same small, now dingy hall where Ormandy conducted in 1973. Onstage, Eschenbach, a rail-straight figure with a gleaming pate, was finishing a run-through of Beethoven's "Egmont" Overture. When he spotted Lang, Eschenbach broke into a grin. The two have known each other since Lang was a teen-ager studying at the Curtis Institute of Music, in Philadelphia. Lang climbed onstage and embraced the conductor.

A piano was wheeled to center stage, and Lang rehearsed "The Yellow River Concerto," which he plays constantly at the request of Chinese audiences, and the Grieg Piano Concerto, a warhorse of a different breed. During the rehearsal, Lang was all business, and by the time he was done his shirt and jacket were soaked with sweat. Throughout, he kept scanning the nearly empty hall, trying to spot his father, Lang Guoren. But his father, who was sitting next to me, had relaxed his constant vigil and had fallen asleep. Lang pursed his lips and frowned with frustration. He and his father have been loving, often tense companions since his prodigy days. His mother was also travelling with him, as she has done since he turned professional, as a teen-ager, but she is milder, sweet, open.

"I wanted to get a sense from my father how the hall sounded," Lang told me later. "To me, it sounded a little dry. There's no sustain in the sound, no *oooom*-no intensity yet. I wanted to hear from my father whether I was being overwhelmed by the orchestra or maybe even vice versa." Awakened from his nap at last, Lang Guoren moved around the hall snapping photographs of everyone; his digital record of Lang's career must be in the millions.

That night, Lang Lang, his parents, a few guests, and Eschenbach took a room at the Palm Springs club, tucked away in a posh apartment building, for dinner. Lang has the same problem eating in Beijing restaurants that Madonna does in New York, and he avoids it. While we ate and Lang and Eschenbach gossiped a little about the classical-music world, a large television tuned to CCTV murmured on the wall. There was only one subject: for weeks, the airwaves had been showing almost nothing other than news of the May 12th earthquake in Sichuan province, in which nearly seventy thousand people perished and millions were left homeless. Lang came on the air in the midst of a benefit performance, and Lang, the real one, looked up at himself on the TV, smiled, and said, "Wow, I look really fat! This screen sucks!" Children who had survived the quake, including seven-year-old triplets wearing pioneer scarves and yellow T-shirts reading "We Are with You," came out to sing with Lang.

Lang watched a while and seemed moved by the children and their plaintive song. Turning the sound down, he said, "Thousands of the dead in Sichuan are children who died in their schools." He told the story of a woman found on all fours under stones, dead after several days, with her three-month-old baby beneath her, still breathing. The rescue workers found the woman's cell phone nearby and, on it, a text message to her child: "Dearest Loved One, If you can live, you must remember that I love you."

A day after the quake, Lang, with various other musicians, played a benefit in Beijing-one of many such events-and raised more than a million dollars. The Chinese I spoke with were extremely aware that the government's foursquare reaction to the earthquake-as opposed to the Burmese generals' refusal to accept foreign aid after the flooding of the Irrawaddy Delta-has helped to offset criticism of the way the Chinese military crushed dissent in Tibet earlier in the year. Lang is not a political animal, except in the facility with which he signals his generally liberal views to Western friends and reporters but skirts any criticism of the Chinese government. Not for him the blatant dissidence of Mstislav Rostropovich; he swims carefully in two oceans. "Before the earthquake, I always thought to myself that the Chinese people were very selfish," Lang said. "We let a very small country, Japan, defeat us, because we were not united. But now you see a real sense of national

unity and sympathy."

The anniversary concert was a sentimental and musical success. Political and business grandees from the West, such as Alexander Haig and Hank Greenberg, sat together with various Communist Party officials in the front rows and applauded heartily after Lang raced his way up the Yellow River. When he was done, Lang swung around on the piano bench and said that he would now play a short Chopin étude "in memory of the earthquake victims," and here he was measured, soulful, precise, leaving all the fireworks to Chopin. The orchestra finished the evening with Beethoven's Sixth and an encore gallop through Leonard Bernstein's overture to "Candide."

At a gala dinner afterward, Lang sat at a huge table with Party officials, visiting emissaries, and local bazillionaires, along with Deng Xiaoping's daughter, Mao's translator, Zhou Enlai's niece, and other satellites of the Beijing élite. There were more flowers on each table than at a Mob funeral. The food was French, the wine expensive. I sat with a shirt manufacturer from Hong Kong who mentioned that he had forty-seven thousand employees; a woman at an adjacent table resembled an Eastern Jocelyn Wildenstein. There were many speeches, many toasts to U.S.-Chinese friendship, and at some point the wine ran out, which was a shame. The ex-foreign minister, Li Zhaoxing, got up to say that after the Philadelphia Orchestra came to Beijing, in 1973, "we had to wait five years for Mr. Deng Xiaoping to initiate reforms. . . . Ever since things opened up, we have been very happy." Excellent. Still no wine. Now Alexander Haig took the microphone and remarked that "Ping-Pong doesn't have the universality of music," which didn't quite have the music of "I'm in charge here," but it sufficed. As we all pondered this thought, a waiter arrived with more wine. Lang, who doesn't drink, made his excuses at around one and went home to sleep.

The next morning, a chauffeur-driven Audi sedan picked Lang up at the China World Hotel. (He has an eye for luxury cars-in our days together in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, he pointed out Maybachs, Bentleys, Rolls-Royces-but "I have a deal with Audi. So I ride in Audis.") He had agreed to teach a master class at Beijing's Central Conservatory, where he studied as a child. China's rise in affluence has been accompanied by a boom in cultural aspiration: forty million children are said to play the piano, a phenomenon often referred to in Beijing as "the Lang Lang effect."

Lang has a serene self-regard, for which he can hardly be blamed. His parents and many of his older relatives who were musicians and intellectuals suffered during the Cultural Revolution. By the time he was born, in 1982, the Chinese Communist Party had enacted the "one-child policy," to curb the population boom; one unintended consequence was a lot of Chinese princelings, darlings of their parents' focussed attentions. Lang Guoren was a talented musician who played the erhu, a sort of two-stringed fiddle, but he was thwarted by the Cultural Revolution, and worked as a police officer in Shenyang's entertainment district; Lang's mother, Xiulan, a former dancer, was a telephone operator. Their combined income was two hundred dollars a month, and they lived in a small barracks apartment on a local air-force base.

As we were driving past some of the more dilapidated apartment blocks, Lang remarked, "Where I grew up, the buildings were a lot worse than these. We paid fifteen dollars a month rent. You could smell the shit, animal or human, before you ever entered the building and then, the minute you walked in, *wham!* Compared to that, this is luxury, this is Fifth Avenue. We had no air-conditioning, no heat."

Lang's parents were determined that their son distinguish himself, and, in pursuit of that ambition, they paid half a year's wages for an upright piano and wedged it into their apartment. Lang began playing before the age of two. His autobiography, "Journey of a Thousand Miles," chronicles the prodigy's progress with a certain predictable cadence: the kind early teacher who saw his talent; the devoted but maddeningly overbearing father; the triumphant first competition at the age of five; an unexpected loss; then more victories, international schooling, and onward into the heavenly present.

Even before Lang's first competition, his father kept instructing his son's teacher that "Lang Lang must be the No. 1 pianist in all of China." In China, people have long talked in those terms: the No. 1 poet of the Tang dynasty, the No. 1 painter, the No. 1 tractor operator. Even when he was four, learning piano as much from watching Tom and Jerry cartoons (especially the episode where Tom plays Liszt's "Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2") as from his teachers, Lang was under tremendous pressure to succeed. One day, when he did not practice enough, Lang's father threw his favorite toys, an army of Transformers, out the window.

When Lang was nine, he and his father moved from Shenyang to the capital to find better teaching and with hopes of gaining entrance to the conservatory. Xiulan stayed home so that she could keep her job and send money to support them. Lang and his father moved into Fengtai, a grim neighborhood of Beijing, where they occupied a studio apartment a hundred feet square, with bunk beds, a piano, a tiny galley kitchen, and no heat.

"In Beijing, we had mice, and I kept worrying that they would bite Lang Lang on the hand," Lang Guoren said. "They didn't, but one mouse ate through one of his piano scores-the score of a Mozart piano sonata."

Winters are long, damp, and cold in Beijing; at night, while Lang practiced, his father would get in his bed and warm it for him. They often slept wearing nearly all the clothes they owned. Lang Guoren would wake at five and lock himself in the bathroom down the hall so that when his son woke he would not have to wait in line before washing up and beginning his day of practicing. Lang Lang was miserable: the neighbors banged on the walls when he practiced; his teacher, whom he refers to now as "Professor Angry," was harsh. Lang Guoren, who would ride his son to classes each morning on the wobbly handlebars of an ancient bicycle, distinguished himself as the loudest of stage parents. Once when Lang Lang came home late from a choral rehearsal where he had been playing piano, his father greeted him in a state of hysteria.

"You've missed nearly two hours of practicing, and you can never get them back," he shouted. "It's too late for everything! Everything is ruined!"

As he recounts in his autobiography, Lang tried to explain himself, but his father cut him off.

"You're a liar and you're lazy! You are horrible. And you have no reason to live. No reason at all."

"What are you talking about?"

"You can't go back to Shenyang in shame! Everyone will know you were not admitted to the conservatory! Everyone will know this teacher has fired you. Dying is the only way out."

Lang was crying, but his father would not stop.

"Take these pills!" Lang Guoren said, shoving a bottle into his hands. "Swallow all thirty pills right now! Everything will be over and you will be dead!"

Out on the apartment's balcony, the father screamed about jumping off, and the son was kicking him in the shins.

"If you won't jump, then swallow these pills! Swallow every last one," the father said.

Finally, Lang began punching the wall-so hard that his hands started to bleed. Shocked at the sight, Lang Guoren finally backed down. He apologized, kissing the boy's hands, and saying that he didn't want Lang Lang to die. "I just want you to practice."

Lang resolved not to look at his father, not to speak to his father, and not to play the piano. His rebellion lasted a few months. When he was ten, he was accepted at the Beijing conservatory.

In Lang's dressing room one day, while he was off signing autographs, I asked Lang Guoren about these moments in his relationship with Lang and the stark way they are portrayed in the autobiography, and he said, "It's painful to read those things. When reporters ask about it, or when people ask about it at public gatherings-book signings and so on-it makes me feel uncomfortable. And the other day at the movie, when the film was showing all those difficult things, too, you'll notice I didn't sit next to my wife or Lang Lang. I didn't want to draw attention to myself. But it really is hard. I don't really want to relive it. But, at the same time, it's true. It's honest."

A light rain was falling when we arrived at the conservatory. The administrators, some teachers, and an eleven-year-old half-American, half-Chinese pianist named Vanessa waited for Lang Lang. They had no umbrellas. Vanessa handed Lang, her hero, a huge bouquet of lilies. (One of Lang Lang's daily occupational hazards is that he is forever being handed bouquets: when he arrives at an airport, when he finishes a concert, when he agrees to a press conference, a film screening, a banquet. When he is handed flowers, the first thing he does after smiling and saying thanks, is look around, eyes darting, for somewhere to ditch the flowers. For nine days, I felt like a maid of honor.)

We entered a modern auditorium, half filled with students. I drafted Vanessa as my translator.

"I feel pretty old today!" Lang said as he bounded up onstage. For the next hour and a half, he worked with three pianists-two young girls, no more than ten or eleven, who played Chopin, and a teen-age boy who tried to make his way through a complicated Brahms piece. He let them play their pieces to the end. He radiated patience, a desire to be thrilled. Especially with the girls, who showed more promise, he put out a lot of empathy and energy. To relax one of them, and to make it clear that she needed more dynamic expression in her playing, he sang to her, he conducted flowingly with his hands, he pretended to fall to the stage in mock delight. The boy was stiffer, and his piece more ambitious, and Lang, getting a little exasperated now, cut him off and, more sternly, began to talk with him about the intricacies of various passages and the

piece's harmonic construction. The boy was not humiliated, but it was easy to see that he felt he had failed.

At the end, as a way to get across a lesson about subtlety (not a quality that Western critics always ascribe to Lang), he played a Liszt transcription from Wagner's "Tristan and Isolde," a soft, haunted piece.

"I thought this would help them, because they don't really think when they play, and I get tired of it," he said later. "I want them to listen to the music. I want them to make a good sentence."

After Lang signed scores of autographs and posed for pictures, he went off to eat lunch with his parents and some of the faculty in a small dining room next to the conservatory's cafeteria. The staff brought out dozens of dishes, and Lang, famished from the constant performance of his day, ate more than anyone, spinning the lazy Susan at the center of the table and scooping off heaps of shrimp, beef, eel, eggplant, string beans, tofu. His mood was as buoyant as ever, but he was frustrated and not a little insulted when one of the teachers told him that the students he had just worked with were "second and third tier." The first tier, the head explained, had gone abroad to study.

"I was really confounded when they told me these were second- and third-tier students," he said later. "To tell you the truth, I gave a lot, but I didn't really have a good time. I know that a lot of the better students are abroad, but I'm disappointed with the Central Conservatory. They'd better improve. The first student was O.K., the second tried, but the third kid just didn't have it. I could spend five days with him and make him a much better pianist, but he's in trouble. In the master classes I give in Europe or the United States, I don't find these basic problems. The Europeans have more technical problems. They don't practice enough. They're a little lazy. The Russians, generally, are still the best, mentally and physically."

Some Asian musicians, especially younger ones, get typed by critics as technically accomplished but cold, mechanical, and I asked Lang if he didn't think that this was a terrible stereotype. He didn't, exactly. "We're not traditionally connected to this music. Many Asians work very hard and play well, but there is no sense of the tradition, no sense of style or rhythm or harmonic structure." The student at the master class, he said, "played Brahms as if it were Chopin, with mixed-up tempos. Everything is unclear somehow. Some Asian players are also very stiff or cold. So there really are problems. Of course, all this depends on the individual, but it's a basic problem. If you look at eighty per cent of Asian players, they have problems that Europeans don't have. With Brahms, for instance, you need to be direct. You can't be polite or scared. I try to be polite when I tell students all this, but I can't avoid the subject.

"Western classical music in China is usually like Chinese food in the West-familiar but not quite the real thing," he said. "A lot of musicians here don't do much beyond play the notes themselves. There is no sense of phrasing. The sound is nice enough, but there is none of that intensity. That is what I had to come to the West to learn. In China, I came to love Vladimir Horowitz and Arthur Rubinstein. I tried to create a combination of them in my own voice. Horowitz is more dynamic, a better technician, more brilliant. Rubinstein makes more mistakes, maybe, but there is more warmth, a warm heart, even if his technique is not on the level of Horowitz."

Lang is equally affectionate and tough-minded about the audiences in China. He described the way people talk and misbehave while he plays, especially in the cities outside Beijing, Guangzhou, and Shanghai. "Sometimes some of them are drinking beer in the seats, or they can even talk on their cell phones and then hold the phones up and say, 'Listen, it's Lang Lang playing.' When I play in these cities, I play more Chinese music than usual-maybe half and half. If you play two hours of Beethoven for those audiences, their heads will explode."

Later, he said, "Look, I don't really feel prejudice. . . . When I first came to London, someone from the BBC asked me, 'Why do you play Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto? Shouldn't you play Chinese music on a Chinese instrument?' I was just eighteen, and I was pretty stunned. He said, 'Can you really understand the Western classical repertoire? It would be like us playing Chinese music.' But I never got angry." After Lang played his concert, the same interviewer offered nothing but compliments. Lang smiled and said, "I think he thought I got the music."

When Lang was fifteen, he left China and his mother and, with his father, went to America to study at the Curtis Institute. A training ground for the Philadelphia Orchestra and for musicians as various as Leonard Bernstein and Nino Rota, Curtis is a more intimate school than Juilliard, and its students are embraced by generosity. Lang and his father were amazed by the spacious apartment that they shared and the privileges that they were given. Not only do students receive a full scholarship but, like all keyboard students, Lang got his own Steinway grand in his rooms-a far cry from the unheated hovel in downtown Beijing. "Every night, in the middle of the night, Lang Lang would wake up and go in just to see if the piano was still there," his mother said. "He was worried it might be taken away or was a dream."

Lang's teacher at Curtis was Gary Graffman, a former prodigy himself, who had been a student there in the thirties. Graffman, who is seventy-nine, studied with Rudolph Serkin and Vladimir Horowitz and had a distinguished career as a

soloist until an injury on his right hand, when he was fifty, slowed him down. Graffman worked closely with Lang and thought that he was an "astonishing" prospect, particularly in the virtuoso repertory of Rachmaninoff and Tchaikovsky. The only complication was Lang's father, who continued to divide his time between hectoring his son and cornering teachers to insist on Lang's brilliance. "The father was very controlling," Graffman said. "Most of my colleagues were not happy with him, as they are not happy with the parents of many of the Asian students. I once told him, 'You are worse than a Jewish mother.' "

At one point, Lang and his father lived in a building at Thirteenth and Spruce, where a street sign said that the neighborhood was a welcome place for gays, straights, bisexuals, and transsexuals. "The gay culture was a little bit of a shock," Lang recalled. "There was a couple nearby kissing, and I thought, These American people are so friendly. We'd heard about 'gay' in China, but we didn't really know how it all worked." Lang translated the street sign for Lang Guoren. "He was very . . . impressed," Lang said.

Soon, Lang began to win favorable attention for his recitals. Graffman was never wild about Lang's gyrations-"He is looking up to the heavens all the time, for I don't know what"-but he could sense that he had a real charisma in performance. "Rubinstein walked out onstage and people were already on the edge of their chairs, while Serkin looked like the janitor," he said. "With Lang Lang, everyone is there with their tongues hanging out. It's not from the gyrations. He projects sound. In my opinion, he will sometimes overdo a phrase, but less than he used to. I was criticized for not letting myself go enough, so it's subjective. He can physically do things that I never could."

The annals of classical music are filled with episodes of the big break: Bernstein, in 1943, replacing Bruno Walter at Carnegie Hall with a few hours' notice, and leading the New York Philharmonic through a thrilling rendition of Strauss's "Don Quixote"; a teen-age André Watts, in 1963, filling in for Glenn Gould and playing the Liszt Piano Concerto No. 1 in E-Flat with the New York Philharmonic and Bernstein, a performance so stunning that even the musicians stood to applaud. In the spring of 1999, when Lang was sixteen, he went to New York and in a single afternoon auditioned for the Cleveland Orchestra, at Carnegie Hall, and for a manager of the Chicago Symphony. His listeners were impressed but, for the moment, offered no jobs. "To save money, I took the Chinatown bus back to Philadelphia," Lang said.

A few months later, at the summer Ravinia Festival, in Chicago, with just a half day's advance notice, Lang was summoned to fill in for André Watts, who had been scheduled to perform with Eschenbach and the Chicago Symphony at the festival's gala benefit. There were three thousand people in the seats and fifteen thousand more on the lawns beyond. Lang was preceded on the bill by two other pianists, Leon Fleisher and Alicia de Larrocha. With Lang waiting in the wings, Isaac Stern went out onstage and announced that Watts was ill but that no one would be disappointed by the Chinese teen-ager who was about to play. The piece was Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-Flat Minor, and Lang swears that he imagined Michael Jordan's slam dunk as he struck the first resounding chords and Tiger Woods's golf swing while he played the octaves. The performance, Lang recalls, was "the moment of a lifetime." There was endless applause, toasts from Stern on the "launch of a long and brilliant career," raves from John von Rhein, in the Chicago *Tribune*, pronouncing Lang "the star of the evening." As the post-concert dinner was ending-by then, it was well after midnight-Eschenbach and a few others asked Lang if he would give them a private recital, right away, of Bach's Goldberg Variations, a set of linked pieces that runs close to an hour.

"I don't have the score," Lang said.

"Surely you have it memorized," Zarin Mehta, the festival's executive director, said.

Lang was not sure that he did, but he dared ask only where he could play. A hall nearby was opened up. Lang understood the request: Eschenbach and Mehta wanted to echo the historic link with Watts, who had replaced Gould-the signature performer of the Goldberg Variations. As they walked into the theatre and Eschenbach turned on the lights and found a piano stool, Lang's father whispered, "Don't worry, you'll remember every single note."

Lang did remember every note, and, though he was not a Bach specialist, played well enough to impress his small, rarefied audience. He went to sleep at 6 A.M., and it is a part of Lang's true-life mythology to say that he woke into an entirely new life. "When I turned eighteen, I bought a house in Philadelphia, for about half a million dollars," he told me. "I was so happy. This was in the year 2000, and I thought that this was the best gift, a good way to begin my twenty-first-century American dream."

The morning after the master class, we drove far out of Beijing to the Ah Rong television studios, where Lang was scheduled to film a commercial for the China Merchants Bank. It was part of his Olympic master plan and his over-all marketing portfolio. "This all started when I signed with Deutsche Grammophon," he said. He was twenty. "They knew I was young, and they wanted to do something with that. If they see a young face, an interesting figure or something, they try to do something. It's not easy to stand out in a record store." Almost from the time he entered his teens, Lang began to experiment

with his outfits.

"As a kid, I loved the idea of white tie and tails because I saw it in that Tom and Jerry cartoon," he said. "Also, it was something Chinese didn't have. I thought, Cool! Great! So when I was six I got a tuxedo with tails. Then I started wearing outfits based on the Peking Opera to perform. This was a time when very few people didn't know the difference between Western piano music and Chinese music. Then I got a suit with sneakers for a competition. Then in America I went and got tails, bought them in L.A. Then I found myself in a five-star hotel in Europe and I realized that the waiters were wearing tails. Was the waiter my colleague? This was when I was about sixteen, and I decided I needed a cooler look. So I went to Tang-dynasty suits: red, pink, blue. Real energy! I finally decided to be myself. Chinese-style suits, no tie, a little sparkle in summer." Now he wears mainly Italian clothes-Armani, Zegna, Dolce & Gabbana-and his father keeps up, wearing Montblanc shades and Gucci loafers.

The trip to the Ah Rong studios was taking twice as long as usual. The traffic was thick, especially as we got to the outskirts, where the newly rich live in gated communities with names like Aix-en-Provence and Little Venice. At last, we arrived, and pulled up to a huge hangar-like building. Around fifty young stagehands, electricians, and other workers scurried around the car and greeted Lang. He gravely regarded the vast soundstage: a baby-grand piano, painted grenadine red, had been hoisted onto a spiralling white stage. Workers were touching up scuff marks on the stage. Like surgeons, or engineers in a nuclear reactor, they wore sterile booties.

"I like it," Lang Lang said, nodding. "Very nice." Then he and his entourage climbed some metal stairs to his dressing room. A considerable lunch had been provided. It was only eleven-thirty, but there was a whole carp in brown sauce, chicken and beef dishes, and Styrofoam crates of freshly steamed rice. Downstairs, the studio workers had bought dumplings from a vending cart, and ate sitting on the ground.

A young woman in charge of Lang's wardrobe showed him his outfit: red tails and red pants, white shirt, black bow tie. He would mime playing "The Yellow River Concerto"-of course. Later on, technicians would film a cheering crowd at a football stadium in Shanghai and then, relying on digital manipulation, would make it seem as if Lang Lang were performing before bank-mad masses. "Sometimes I hear 'The Yellow River Concerto' in my sleep," Lang said.

In one corner four young women chatted about the costume. They were members of Lang Lang's fan club-the Beijing division-and they were there to write up the filming for their Internet site. Lang mentions his interest in girls fairly often, but, like a dutiful celebrity, he told me that he had "no one special at the moment." He added, "I am so busy." The girls from the fan club were off limits. "It's a bad idea to hit on the fans."

Lang handed me a storyboard for the commercial. The ad opens with a young girl making the sign of a heart with her hands. Then a boatload of rowers is shown steaming downriver as the narrator speaks of the power of synergy. Cut to Lang Lang, in his red tuxedo, pounding away at the piano, head thrown back, lifting his right hand in a gesture of ecstasy, while the masses applaud. As the music reaches a crescendo, so, too, does the hysteria of the crowd. A voice-over declares, "We are connected, between hearts and hands, in the power of China." Then Lang Lang makes the sign of a heart with his hands.

"It seems a little obscure," I said.

Lang shrugged and winked.

"It's patriotic stuff," he said. "You'll see."

With that, Lang walked up a white staircase and sat down at the red piano. The instrument had been fitted out with hidden lights above the keyboard and underneath the soundboard; many more lights hovered above. Lang was sweating profusely before he'd hit a single note.

"Anyone have a towel?" he asked.

Two young women rushed over and patted him dry. Another knelt before him and polished his shoes and then the soles of his shoes. Another kept handing him bottled water. Lang Lang's capacity for eating is outstripped only by his need for hydration. His mother, who travels with Lang even more than his father these days, is ever solicitous, carrying at least two bottles of water in her handbag at all times.

Lang is so young, so engaging, that he can seem guileless. But he has an awareness of the commercial world that few of his peers can equal. With the help of his handlers in New York, he has learned how other classical musicians developed and exploited their star power, how Horowitz and Bernstein, Herbert von Karajan and Anne-Sophie Mutter and Yo-Yo Ma took

the extra steps that provided more celebrity and greater fees. None of them, however, approached the maestro of the commercial, Luciano Pavarotti, but Lang was intent on trying.

"Pavarotti was a genius at marketing-he made himself a brand," Lang said. Herbert Breslin, who was Pavarotti's manager for more than thirty years, told me that, while classical music is a "tiddlysnit business," the danger of commercial obsession is that the foundation, the artistry, will be debased or lost.

With the commercials, the film, and the autobiography a fait accompli, Lang was now considering working with movie composers-like Howard Shore, who did 'Lord of the Rings' "-and developing a Hollywood version of his life story.

On the way back to Beijing, Lang fielded calls about new contracts. Though it's hard to imagine some artists working the phones with quite the same ferocity, he said, "Look, it feels great. I used to get a hundred dollars for a concert, and I still loved it. Now I do the same thing and get so much more!"

For a year or two after the Ravinia Festival, Lang Lang kept faith with the critics, even as he booked more and more concerts. John von Rhein, of the Chicago *Tribune*, was no less enthusiastic about Lang's promise when he filled in for Richard Goode in March, 2000, than he had been when Lang filled in for Watts. Lang returned to the Ravinia Festival for the seventh time in 2002, but now von Rhein had lost patience. Of Lang's performance he said, "All he needed was a white sequined suit and a candelabra and Ravinia could have sold him as the new Liberace." That was kind compared to the drubbing that Anthony Tommasini, of the *Times*, administered the same year. Tommasini wrote that he could abide neither Lang's physical contortions-"his sweeping arm gestures, his twisted posture"-nor his "contorted music making." The next year, on the occasion of Lang's solo debut at Carnegie Hall, Tommasini whacked him for an "incoherent, self-indulgent and slam-bang crass" performance:

Not every musician has to be an intellectually searching artist, but Mr. Lang's head seems to be so full of his own hype that there can't be much room left for analytic thinking. The opening phrase of the first work on his program, the breezy main theme of Schumann's "Abegg" Variations, was promising, played with grace and lovely sound. But in the immediate repeat of that phrase Mr. Lang was already up to his attention-grabbing tricks: coyly prolonging the upbeat, milking the tune emotively, making everything cute.

At that concert, which was recorded for both audio and video, Lang ran roughshod over pieces by Schumann, Haydn, and Schubert, but the applause from the audience was warm, and when he changed from tails into a silk Chinese jacket and brought out his father to play the erhu in a duet known as "Horses," the reception was thunderous. After hearing the first encore, Schumann's "Träumerei," "yanked around," Tommasini had had enough. He told readers of the *Times* that he walked out, lest he be "a party pooper, let alone impede the future of classical music."

Suddenly, Lang Lang was "Bang Bang"-all affect and no depth, an over-the-top fop, whose playing was the musical version of what the Russians call *poshlost*: cheap, kitschy, lily-gilding of the lowest order. Even as the world's best orchestras, conductors, and concert halls were inviting him to perform and record with them, the critical disenchantment grew. So harsh was one of von Rhein's broadsides that Eschenbach, playing the role of father-protector, demanded a retraction. None was forthcoming.

In recent years, the pianist and conductor Daniel Barenboim, who is based in Berlin, has taken over from Gary Graffman as Lang Lang's teacher-protector. Barenboim has tried to shield his charge from critical pain. "When Lang Lang started out, so many critics hailed him as something unique, for all reasons, musical and national," he said. "But it's very difficult when you are put on a pedestal to stay there."

Every three or four months, Lang halts his impossible schedule and goes to Berlin for ten days or so and, in relative isolation, works with Barenboim. Even though Lang's concert repertoire still emphasizes concertos by Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, and Grieg, and other virtuoso set pieces, he and Barenboim have been exploring a more mature repertoire, including the Goldberg Variations and the late sonatas of Schubert and Beethoven.

"Lang Lang has the kind of talent that is unlimited," Barenboim said. "His future depends almost exclusively on him, how he looks up to his talent, how he grows, and everything around it. There is a whole culture about a person. The career of a jazz or a pop musician might be intense, like Lang Lang's life, but the content is different, and the career of a classical musician tends to be much longer. If he maintains his modesty and discipline, he could have the most wonderful long life as a musician. Most people don't have the luxury or the chance to be a master of their own destiny. So whatever he achieves in life will be the result of his talent. God forbid, he stops looking after his talent."

One morning, while we were waiting to board a flight to the southeastern city of Guangzhou, where Lang was to

perform another concert with the Philadelphia Orchestra, he admitted that the disapproval of peers is far more daunting than the crabbed notices of the critics. He told me how, some years ago, in different encounters, one prominent soloist told him to give up on Mozart and another that he was hopeless with Beethoven.

"It was scary as hell," Lang said. "A player who can't deal with Mozart and Beethoven might as well go home. It's true that, as a Chinese, I feel more immediately close to the Eastern Europeans-like those little girls you heard playing Chopin. Compare it to the discomfort of the boy playing Brahms. Sometimes, when a Chinese pianist plays something like Brahms, it's not a culture clash-it's a culture crash."

And yet despite the warnings and admonitions Lang is determined to expand his repertoire. He is not a deeply intellectual musician, nor is he hesitant to dismiss whole categories of music with the wave of a hand: he is bewildered by Wagnerian opera ("I don't know how someone can sit through the 'Ring' ") and seems not to like much Western classical music after early Schoenberg. But he is ambitious and listens solely to that ambition. In Guangzhou, in an almost comically sprawling suite (it featured one room that was entirely taken up with a rock garden), Lang ended a long day of book signings, a movie première, and an interminable dinner with local well-wishers by practicing one of Beethoven's finger-exploding late sonatas, Opus 101. It was nearing midnight. Lang sat at the piano-a cheap upright-and looked out for a while at the Guangzhou skyline, with the boats snaking slowly along the Pearl River. Then he closed his eyes, made a figure-eight motion with his neck (a tiny *pop!*), and settled into the opening bars. There was a knock at the door, but he ignored it. There was a radio playing somewhere, but he ignored it. His concentration was such that someone could have dangled upside down above the piano and he wouldn't have missed a note. He was lost in the sonata-playing and replaying passages, clearly summoning in his mind the instructions he'd got from Barenboim in Berlin a few weeks before. When he stopped playing, he looked at his hands splayed out in front of his eyes. They are large but not freakish. Lang's handshake is like a fighter's, a bit limp, so as not to encourage muscular squeezing from anyone. "These late sonatas are so complex, so many voices," he said. After an hour, I left him.

Lang played the final concerts with the Philadelphia Orchestra in Guangzhou and Shanghai and set off on a tour of various European halls. The next time I saw him was in mid-July, when he came to New York to play Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto with the Philharmonic, in Central Park. It would not have mattered much if the playing had been third rate, so cool was the evening, so light the mood. Lang played the red Steinway grand, which he was auctioning off on his Web site to raise money for earthquake victims. The sound system was weak; at times, it was as if tens of thousands of people had gathered to listen to a clock radio with the volume set on "4." And yet Lang still managed to project, running through the breakneck passages with no more effort than a champion racehorse rounding a corner. This was just the sort of bravura piece and hyper-public occasion of which he had become a master. In the *Times*, Tommasini, Lang's critical nemesis just five years ago, pronounced his playing "exciting and brilliant": "He vanquished the technical challenges, playing with utter command and disarming joy, bringing out inner voices and rhythmic syncopations that caught his ear."

Lang's publisher, Stephen Rubin, had arranged a post-concert dinner for him at Shun Lee West, near Lincoln Center. Lang arrived late with his mother, still coated with the fairy dust of applause and congratulations. He was especially glad to see Gary Graffman, his former teacher. Graffman beamed as he talked about new and younger Chinese musicians he was meeting at the Curtis Institute. The banquet was long, but it never flagged, and at one point Lang turned to Graffman and said, "This all turned out pretty well, don't you think?"

"I think so," the teacher said. "I really think so."

LOAD-DATE: August 4, 2008

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Magazine

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