



LANG Time Gone

by Jeannie Mellinger

“...We [were] overwhelmed not only by Lang Lang’s technical expertise, but also his marvelous interpretation of one of the most complex and emotional pieces in the piano repertoire. We felt that we had witnessed an extraordinary performance by an artist who was destined to become incredibly well-known. It was a privilege for us to have been at his concert.”

— Steve and Patti Sheriff, recalling Lang Lang’s first appearance with the North Carolina Symphony.

When Lang Lang first performed with the North Carolina Symphony in September 2002, the orchestra had just begun its search for a new music director. The spotlight was on Peter Oundjian, the first of eleven candidates that the Symphony would audition over the next two seasons. But when Oundjian’s remarkable young guest artist began the first phrases of Rachmaninoff’s Concerto No. 2, eyes shifted from the maestro to the pianist, widened noticeably and fixed there. More than a few jaws fell open.

The challenging “Rach 2,” as music insiders enjoy calling it, requires Olympian virtuosity and deftness at the keyboard. Of the piano concerto repertoire, it is one of the showiest and most crowd-pleasing works, with its tricky dynamics, tempi changes and blistering runs. And with Lang Lang’s charisma, passion and Vesuvial explosiveness, the audience practically vibrated in the highly charged atmosphere within Meymandi Concert Hall.

We all live for performances like this – those uncommon nights when you find yourself balanced on the last three inches of your seat, coiled in anticipation, fighting the urge to propel yourself to your feet in order to clap and shout your unabashed approval even before the last notes are played.

The *News & Observer*, writing about the concert, described Lang Lang as “a young man so full of the joy of his calling, and so unaffected, that he really can’t contain himself. After a particularly exciting passage, he’ll throw a dazzling, delighted smile as if to say, ‘How do you like THAT?’ As he throws fistfuls of notes into the air, he’s clearly having the time of his life.”

A baby-faced 20-year-old at his first Raleigh concert, Lang Lang still traveled with his father and his enthusiasm about everything, including the Raleigh P.F. Chang’s, was so charming that musicians and staff alike fell a little in love with him during the week’s rehearsals. And in those September concerts, it wasn’t long before the audience felt the same way. He had us at the fifth bar.

“It was one of the most electrifying performances in our very new Meymandi Concert Hall,” says Symphony patron Samuel Sugg. “There was significant anticipation of Peter [Oundjian] being there, but the real show was Lang Lang’s

performance that night...it was the longest ovation of the year.”

Sherry and David Heuser relate a similar memory: “Hearing Lang Lang perform with our orchestra stands as one of the highlights of our symphony experience. We went shopping for a CD of his work the next morning.”

Since that performance, Lang Lang’s march to legendary status continues apace. At 27, he has played sold-out recitals and concerts in every major city in the world and tens of thousands have enjoyed his performances around the globe. In 2008, over five billion people viewed his performance in Beijing’s opening ceremony of the XXIX Olympics, and one pundit coined the term “the Lang Lang effect” to describe the powerful force that inspired more than forty million Chinese children to learn to play classical piano.

Then there are the television shows, magazine profiles, performances for international dignitaries, requests for residencies and master classes all over the world, an autobiography printed and read in 11 languages, and a Grammy nomination. Steinway recognized Lang Lang’s popularity with children by creating five versions of the Lang Lang™ Steinway, designed for early music education.

Really, the list of his honors and accomplishments would be more appropriate for someone whose career had spanned numerous decades.

Now Lang Lang returns to Meymandi Concert Hall for a special one-night-only concert on January 31, 2011. Music Director Grant Llewellyn will be at the podium, leading the orchestra and Lang Lang in what will be an unforgettable performance of Tchaikovsky’s well-loved Piano Concerto No. 1.

“It’s a very special moment that I try first to connect to the music and be as the bridge between the music which already exists and the piano, and to bring this music again from underground to reality,” Lang Lang told Reuters in a recent interview. “Every time you play a piece it’s like you bring a life, a new life, and when the last note finishes it has disappeared.”

Does that sound like magic? It is, but there is no trickery. An evening with Lang Lang and the North Carolina Symphony will actually stay in your memory long after those last notes have vanished. 🎹

A CONVERSATION WITH LANG LANG

WHERE WERE YOU BORN?
Shenyang, China.

WHEN YOU WERE VERY YOUNG, WHAT DID YOU WANT TO BE WHEN YOU GREW UP?
I always wanted to be a pianist.

THE BEST THING ABOUT YOUR WORK NOW:
I get to play the piano.

WORST THING ABOUT YOUR WORK:
There is no time to have a vacation.

WHO WAS/IS THE MOST INFLUENTIAL PERSON IN YOUR LIFE?
I would say two people: [pianist] Gary Graffman and [conductor] Christoph Eschenbach.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE STRESS RELIEVER?
A great massage.

WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE GREATEST MISCONCEPTION ABOUT CLASSICAL MUSIC?
That it’s old-fashioned.

WHAT’S ALWAYS IN YOUR FRIDGE?
Fruit.

FANTASY CAREER – IF YOU WERE NOT A PIANIST, WHAT WOULD YOU BE?
I would have my own comedy talk show.

WHAT MUSIC DO YOU LIKE TO LISTEN TO JUST FOR YOUR PERSONAL PLEASURE?
Classical and hip-hop.

WHAT IS YOUR IDEA OF THE PERFECT DAY?
First I’d watch a football game, then spend some time practicing piano and finish up with a nice dinner.

WHAT HISTORICAL FIGURE YOU WOULD LIKE TO MEET?
Two – Mozart and Shakespeare.

WHAT WAS THE FIRST PIECE OF MUSIC YOU FELL IN LOVE WITH?
Chopin’s Waltz in D-flat Major. That was my first Chopin piece.

HOW DO YOU MANAGE TO JUGGLE EVERYTHING YOU HAVE TO DO?
I have a perfect team to coordinate my day-to-day schedule worldwide.

DO YOU HAVE ANY PERFORMANCE SUPERSTITIONS OR ROUTINES?
I always eat chocolate to bring energy.

IS THERE A BOOK YOU REALLY ENJOY THAT YOU LIKE TO RECOMMEND TO FRIENDS?
The Analects of Confucius

YOU TRAVEL A GREAT DEAL – WHAT DO YOU ENJOY ABOUT TRAVEL? WHAT DO YOU DISLIKE?
To see every corner of the world is the good part, but the jet-lag is awful.