

“If you know how to fly but you never knew how to walk, wouldn’t that be sad?”

Lang Lang talks about the joys and challenges of being a super virtuoso

“Truly a super virtuoso” – this was the verdict of critic and piano connoisseur Joachim Kaiser after hearing Lang Lang play Tchaikovsky’s B flat minor concerto, often described as the ultimate virtuoso piano piece, in Munich in February 2005. The graceful Chinese pianist with his inexhaustible reserves of strength and his incredible reflexes stands as a symbol of his country’s determination to make a name for itself in the cultural world as well. Lang Lang is one of those ecstatic performers whose body language and expressions reflect the music’s inner workings – both its lyricism and its drama.

In a very personal conversation with **THE FOCUS**, he reveals what drives him, as a musician and as a human being, in the pursuit of his extraordinary career.

The Focus: When you played at the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games, an estimated 40 million Chinese people were watching you on TV. Was this a particularly rewarding moment for you?

Lang Lang: I felt like I was playing to the Universe. This was the biggest event ever hosted in China. The whole world was watching. This made it an unbelievable night for me, especially because the main idea of the show was to represent a new generation starting out – at the end I had a little girl beside me and encouraged her to play.

The Focus: Your father is a musician himself, and he had the driving ambition to make his son an exceptional pianist. He pursued that goal quite relentlessly. Did you find your father too strict and demanding at times?

Lang Lang: Yes, certainly. Not every day, but sometimes.

The Focus: But was it important for you that he kept up this pressure? Or do you think that you could have reached the same goal in a different way?

Lang Lang: It was fortunate and unfortunate. To be a pianist you really need to train very hard. Unfortunately this is not something we can avoid; but fortunately I had someone who pushed me a bit, not every day but sometimes, when I didn’t want to practice.

The Focus: In the early years many young musicians practice because their parents ask them to play. Often, when they are ten or eleven the motivation starts, to come from within...

Lang Lang: From the very beginning I really loved the piano. But for a kid it’s hard when you see other children having a good time; when they play football or take holidays. As a pianist you cannot play basketball, a sport I really liked. Competitive sports are simply too dangerous for the hands. So you have to give up a lot of things. This certainly means a sacrifice, and sometimes you ask yourself whether it’s worth it or not.

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The Focus: What was the compensation for all this hard work and pressure?

Lang Lang: I think the music itself was the driving force. I wanted to become a professional pianist. I was convinced that the way the music moves me could make up for all those disadvantages. You cannot work or play in permanent overdrive merely because you want to earn money through music or to become super-famous. In this case you would probably have selected the wrong profession.

The Focus: You have always felt a close affinity with sport. In your autobiography you write that being competitive is somehow in your genes, and you often compare yourself to tennis players or to figures like Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods. Was the ambition to be the world’s number one the key factor behind your efforts?

Lang Lang: This is very interesting. When you are in Asia, particularly in China, Japan or Korea, parents pursue this ambitious kind of education. They expect you to enter competitions, and if you’re number one you’re great. This is built into the Chinese mindset. Be number one in this, number one in that, number one pianist, number one scientist. I don’t say it’s a waste of time to compare yourself with others. But when I was a kid at the Conservatory, every time I did an audition I was ranked. The top eight went on to the national competition. As a young boy I was very childish in this way. I even ranked the greatest pianists, imagining them in competition with each other – like the teams of the German Bundesliga or the English Premier League. And I would practice with Horowitz on video to see if I could make my own performance better. This was childish stuff, but it gave me the energy to become a better pianist and to improve myself.

The Focus: What was the turning point? When did you leave the rankings behind?

Lang Lang: When I came to America my teacher Gary Graffman told me to forget about these stupid rankings and just focus on working hard on the music. Recently I was watching an Arthur Rubinstein interview on TV. The

interviewer asked him: Are you the greatest pianist? And Rubinstein said: “This kind of question makes me really angry. If you look at Beethoven, Mozart, and Chopin, do you think about rankings? When I see pictures by one of the greatest painters, I think his style is probably the only way. And as soon as I see another great artist, I say again that this is the only way. Every great artist is a whole world in himself.” I totally agree. There is no ranking between masters.

The Focus: Arguably, winning is one way of defining the culture of success. How would you define success today, if there’s nobody telling you you’re number one and you don’t want to hear this anyway?

Lang Lang: No, no, the truth is I am not number one. There is no such thing! You can be the best-selling pianist at the box office, but that doesn’t mean you’re the best pianist. It shows, however, that you get rewards from the audience or from your colleagues. That’s great. It makes you really happy to see a packed crowd at a concert, an audience that’s passionate about the music you produce. You feel that you have the best profession in the world – being able to transport them into another world through the music.

The Focus: It sounds as though what you define as rewarding is also a kind of sharing.

Lang Lang: Yes, yes. Absolutely.

The Focus: Does this also play a role in your idea of introducing a young generation to classical music, your commitment to your International Music Foundation?

Lang Lang: I’ve thought about this for many years. As I was growing up I attended many master classes and drew a lot of inspiration from education – not just through school but also through artistic activities. I was lucky because I studied in a music school. I think Germany is fine in this respect, because of its long musical tradition. But in many other countries – in Europe as well as in America or in Asia – the music education budget is what gets cut. Many kids don’t get a musical education. But I think it’s important for them to listen, and I really believe that classical music can help them to learn the shape of life’s experience, the creativity that will develop their brain, and also to be sensitive through music and to learn about the world, and to build their own world through music. This kind of music, I think, will change many young people’s lifestyle and also their discipline and their concentration and imagination.





RESUMÉ

Lang Lang

Lang Lang, who was born in Shenyang in 1982, is one of those mysterious beings who come into the world with an “innate technical ability” – to quote the conductor Bruno Walter. Legend has it that Lang Lang was two years old when he saw Tom, in the cartoon Tom and Jerry, playing Franz Liszt’s Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2. His parents devoted all their energy to enabling him to learn the piano. At the age of five he won a local competition, from the age of nine he attended the Beijing Conservatory, and aged eleven he won first prize at the fourth International Competition for Young Pianists in Ettlingen, Germany. His breakthrough came in 1999, when he played the Tchaikovsky Concerto at the Ravinia Festival, near Chicago, in place of the indisposed André Watts. He made his debut in the Carnegie Hall in 2003 with a recital that was recorded on CD and DVD. His international successes have received a rapturous response in his native China, encouraging many millions of young Chinese people to start learning the piano.

The Focus: Did you ever find it difficult to approach the music of a foreign culture? How does a Chinese artist access the Western way of thinking and Western music?

Lang Lang: Well, I grew up with this music. My father and my mother talked to me a lot about Mozart, Beethoven, and Bach in particular, and also about Chopin, Tchaikovsky, and Rachmaninov. I learned about events in Europe around that time. When I started playing their pieces it seemed quite natural for me. But when I went to Germany for a competition – I was eleven years old – I realized that there is a different kind of playing in the European tradition. I felt that I had to attend more live concerts, that I had to study the recordings and videos of the older generation: Schnabel and Rubinstein, Arrau, Horowitz and Richter. I had to learn to understand their playing. Finally I decided to go to the Curtis Institute of Music, which is one of the foremost classical schools. But if you choose the wrong teacher you don’t learn anything.

The Focus: Who were the most influential teachers for you?

Lang Lang: Gary Graffman was the perfect teacher for me at that point. I started developing rapidly with him. Later I met Christoph Eschenbach. He belongs to the old tradition. This collaboration was a life-changing experience. It’s just incredible how well he can teach and how well he understands music. This opened my mind. There are many mysterious questions in music, and I got many answers from him. This has nothing to do with talent, but with education and tradition. And he is part of the tree of this tradition.

The Focus: You once said that as a musician you liked to tackle the most difficult pieces first. What were the rewards of music when you were a boy, and what gives you most pleasure as an artist today?

Lang Lang: When you start with a difficult piece, it’s like a big leap forward. It’s extremely difficult to play pieces like Rachmaninov’s Third Concerto when you’re twelve. Fortunately I was also playing the complete Chopin Etudes at that time, and that helped me to work on the hard passages. But it’s good to start early, too. Then you won’t be afraid of these pieces later, when you come to play them on stage. But you can’t depend only on Rachmaninov’s Third or Tchaikovsky’s First or Third. Very soon everybody will be wanting you to play artistically more important pieces like the Mozart or Beethoven concertos. I began my career in grand style,

playing virtuoso pieces. After two years I started to draw fire from the critics. This guy, they argued, only plays loud, quick, fast, and challenging music. So then I switched to Beethoven and Chopin, to the more intimate, more inward-looking music. This is how I have developed. I learned the early Beethoven Sonatas, which was really difficult in the beginning because it's not only a totally different technique, but it calls for a different kind of knowledge. If you know how to fly but you never knew how to walk, wouldn't that be sad?

The Focus: What role did chamber music play?

Lang Lang: Chamber music is very important, but you need to find the right partner. You need to find someone who is more experienced than you, who will tell you how to play. This is especially important for soloists. In fact my next CD project is chamber music: the piano trios of Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninov.

The Focus: So you've found the right partners?

Lang Lang: Yes, I think I found the right partners and took a few lessons from the experts; and I hope I've acquired the rhythm, the feeling, the sense for chamber music. I wouldn't say that I'm a very mature chamber music player yet, because I know that many of my colleagues can play chamber music like fish in water. Sometimes I get it just right, sometimes I don't.

The Focus: Do you get a different kind of reward from playing as a soloist and as a chamber musician?

Lang Lang: Yes, chamber music is like teamwork. In a solo work, all the players in the orchestra listen to you very closely. You listen to them too, but when it's a concerto you need to lead a bit. In chamber music you pass the ball to your partners. In a way it's like football, if I can dare to compare the two. You are the center of attention when you get the ball, and then you pass it to another player. In chamber music it is important to listen carefully for many reasons – for the phrasing, the timing, the harmony, and because often it's the piano that holds the key to the harmony of the piece as a whole. Your ear needs to react faster in order to support the violinists, flutists, cellists; you need to be more grounded, in a way, and this helps you to understand the music structurally.

The Focus: In your autobiography you talk about a time when you experienced feelings of loneliness, instability, and even depression. There was also an injury that

prevented you from playing for a while and you had to struggle to find your inner sense of equilibrium. What were the most important lessons you learned from this time, and what other things became important, besides playing the piano?

Lang Lang: If you are sick or injured it doesn't necessarily mean you lose your inner balance. The experience had many aspects to it. It could be that your lifestyle is what's damaging your health: too much playing hurts your arms; too much traveling is very unnatural. You feel very lonely. If you are doing something that you don't like, if you feel you are forcing yourself, then you definitely won't enjoy a long career: You'll get tired or bored, you might even burn out altogether. So you have to re-think what you are doing. You have to learn to plan your schedule. You have to start making friends around the globe. It's not normal forcing yourself to get up every morning to catch another plane, rushing from city to city and heading straight into rehearsals, grabbing just a sandwich on the way, then finishing late and having dinner at eleven or twelve. Hotel rooms are all the same worldwide, the airports are the same. You sleep on the plane. That's tolerable for a week, perhaps, but no longer.

The Focus: Have you found a solution now?

Lang Lang: Now I feel much better. My mother or my father always comes with me. Or I ask a close friend to travel with me. I've made many friends around the globe. My schedule is organized in a more sensible way. I don't need to fly from continent to continent all the time. I'm in Europe for five months, in America for three, in Asia for two. I stay ten days in one city working on chamber music, accompanying singers, playing recitals, playing with orchestras, doing master classes, going into schools to talk to children. I can stay in one hotel and go to work from there and this is more like having a home base. In the future I want to do this more and more.

The Focus: Thank you very much for talking to us.

Lang Lang: Let me just say this was a fantastic interview – so well prepared, thank you.

The interview was conducted by Ulrike Mertens, Editor-in-Chief of THE FOCUS, and Friedrich Kuhn, Egon Zehnder International, Berlin.