

ROLL OVER BEETHOVEN

HE'S PERFORMED FOR PRESIDENTS, PLAYED WITH THE FINEST PHILHARMONICS AND LIVES LIKE A ROCK STAR. BUT CAN PIANIST LANG LANG MAKE THE LEAP TO GLOBAL SUPERSTARDOM?



INTERVIEW BY JONATHAN GREEN
PORTRAITS BY NEALE HAYNES

From his airy \$3 million apartment within a glossy black skyscraper, 77 storeys above New York, Lang Lang momentarily wrestles with temptation. He stares at a picture on his phone of a girl: her eyes are hazy with seduction in mind and the body language betrays an unmistakable siren promise. Inked on her forehead is a message: 'Pick Me!'

This picture has been sent via Twitter, but unlike the hundred or so others he receives every day, it's grabbed his attention. Lang Lang cracks a grin and laughs uneasily. 'Some girls are more aggressive,' he

says, his nimble thumbs scrolling the image back and forth. 'She's kind of cute, see?'

In three days' time, Lang Lang will play an open-air concert in New York's Central Park with the Shanghai Philharmonic. His record company has offered one lucky girl the chance to go backstage to meet him. He's been inundated with emails and Twitter messages.

This pop-hero treatment is, he says, not anomalous with being a classical musician. 'My point is that classical music is for everybody. By playing classical music I'm getting the same reaction as pop stars or movie stars. I don't believe that only movie stars, sports stars or pop

stars can have that fan base. I believe that if classical musicians do well, you can have the same response, the same reaction.' He beams broadly: 'People *do* go wild and give me high fives!'

The spiky-haired, Versace-wearing Chinese pianist is a hot catch. At 28, he is one of the most successful classical pianists in the world, with the appeal and status of a rock star. He was named in *Time* magazine's list of 100 most influential people in the world and voted among *People* magazine's 20 sexiest men alive. He's performed with every top orchestra in the world and played at the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics to a



billion people. In China he has become so famous and emblematic of the country's thundering locomotive rise on the world stage that 40 million parents in the country press their children into playing the piano: it's known as the 'Lang Lang effect'.

A few months ago he signed a deal with Sony records for a reputed \$3 million. He is that rare and highly bankable asset – a classical pianist who has hurtled into the mainstream in the same way as punk violinist Nigel Kennedy or Pavarotti.

But he's not without his critics. He's been derided for 'his sweeping arm gestures, his twisted posture' and his

'slam-bang crass' playing. Traditionalists hate it when he pumps his fist in the air or when he plunges down on the keyboard and becomes emotionally swept up in his performances; the old guard find him vulgar. 'The J-Lo of the piano,' sniffed veteran pianist Earl Wild.

But even the critics can't deny that he's been a commercial success, and Lang Lang's life is a constant, uneasy struggle between his pre-eminent status as a virtuoso concert pianist – the most famous in the world – and the trappings of an MTV lifestyle.

He 'high-fived' me at the door of his apartment. I'd wanted to respond with similar matey vigour but then a

thought crossed my mind: I was about to slap the source of his fortune – hands that are insured for millions. I gave a weak, overly thoughtful high five in return.

For Lang Lang, the dual lifestyle – partying like Aerosmith and playing exquisite Chopin nocturnes – presents its own unique challenges. 'I was in Tel Aviv recently with my friends, who took me to a bar with many nice girls,' he says in heavily accented English. 'I forgot how loud it was and three or four hours later when I got out there was a "zzzzz" in my ears. The next day I went to the concert hall to play – but the buzzing noise was still there. My friend felt guilty and ►

► kept calling me. “Are you OK?” he said. “Do you still have the ringing in your ears? Oh no, it’s all my fault!”

It’s a different story when he’s on tour: much of the time Lang Lang’s mother is with him. ‘Sometimes after a concert I like to stay late, to party, and my mum always says, “Come back early, because you need to get up in the morning.” Sometimes I don’t like that, because you work really hard and you need to go out and have fun. But in a way she’s right because then I *can’t* get up in the morning.’ He’s sequestered from the world up here in this luxurious marble-lined apartment, with peppermint scented air-conditioning in the foyer and lifts. One wall is constructed entirely of glass and it offers a spectacular view over Central Park.

On one side a bookshelf is filled with gifts from fans (there are several teddy bears) and some stuffed animals he was given when he made an appearance on *Sesame Street*. Among them are pictures of Lang Lang standing between George Bush Snr and Jnr, another of him with Barack Obama and one of him with Paul McCartney. He tells me that he keeps bumping into Obama. ‘Last time I saw him, when he was presented with the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, he came up to me and said, “Oh my God, you keep following me around the world.”’ Lang Lang gave tips to the President’s two daughters on stage fright. ‘I told them to think of a strawberry or ice cream to relax,’ he says.

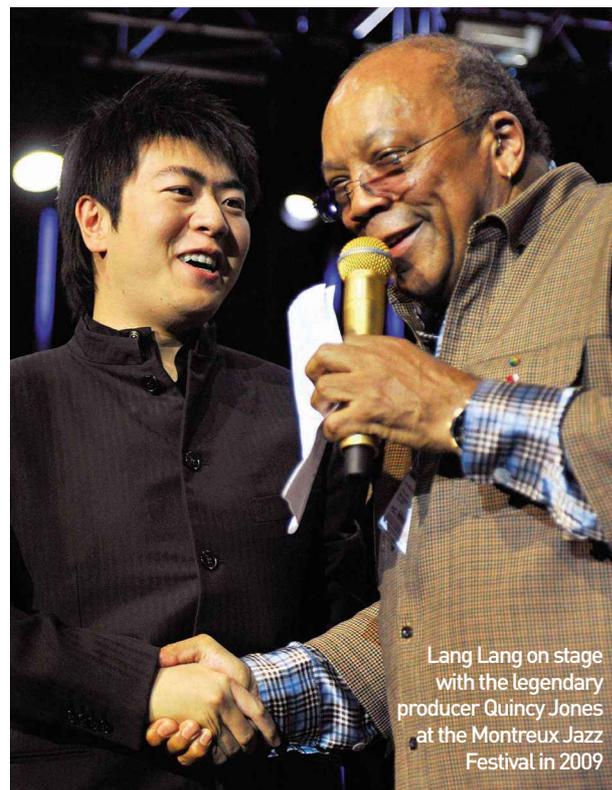
Lang Lang is on the road 260 days a year. Unlike rock

musicians who play tours and then relax, his schedule is constant. He works incredibly hard but what, I wonder, is the secret of his success? He sits down in a red leather chair and makes a confession: ‘I have a secret weapon.’ He holds up a pinkie finger that is almost as long as his ring finger. ‘See,’ he says, pressing his palm to mine. The extended length of the digit and his supple dexterity means that Lang Lang can reach 12 keys at a time.

Lang Lang can play so fast that his hands become a blur. As a young child he watched a Tom and Jerry cartoon called *The Cat Concerto*. It features Jerry dressed in white tie and tails and playing *Hungarian Rhapsody No 2* by Franz Liszt. What amazed the young Lang Lang was the speed and elasticity of the cat’s fingers. It planted a seed in his mind that was later to become, in his own words, ‘ruthless and overwhelming ambition’.

Since then, his inspirations have changed slightly. ‘I remember when I was 19 and playing in Tucson, Arizona. The first day I played two recitals back-to-back in a small hall. I noticed that there was a beautiful blonde girl with a red dress, and the day after when I played the same girl was sitting in the same seat. I thought to myself, “Now we are talking!” That was very inspirational.’

Lang Lang was born into poverty in the gloomy northeast industrial city of Shenyang. He was pressed into



Lang Lang on stage with the legendary producer Quincy Jones at the Montreux Jazz Festival in 2009

‘BY PLAYING
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GROOMING BY LISA AAHRON AT KATERYANINC.COM/AMAP/PRESS ASSOCIATION

piano playing by his tyrannical father, a policeman whose own musical ambitions had been thwarted. Following the Cultural Revolution in China, in which music was banned, Lang Lang's father saw the piano as the only way for his son and the family to distinguish themselves from the 1.3 billion other souls looking to escape poverty in China's unsparingly competitive system. As the only child, Lang Lang became the sole focus of his father's ambitions. His first piano cost his parents about £150, half their annual salary. 'He must be the number one piano player in all of China and then all over the world,' Lang Lang's father had demanded of his son's first piano teacher.

Aged five he won the Shenyang Piano Competition and at nine he and his father moved to Beijing, 400 miles away, so that Lang Lang could audition for Beijing's Central Conservatory of Music.

Lang Lang's father gave up his job, and the pair lived in a squalid one-room apartment where rodents ate the music scores and the place was so cold the young musician played piano just to keep warm. A childhood under chronic pressure eventually caused a brutal and emotionally scarring incident, when Lang Lang's father urged his son's suicide. It's a story he recounts in the biography, *Journey Of A Thousand Miles*.

One day Lang Lang returned home an hour late due to an extended music session at school, which meant he was late for starting a three-hour practice session with his father.

'You have no reason to live!' screamed his father, scolding his son for ruining their lives. 'You can't go back to Shenyang in shame. Everyone will know you were not admitted to the conservatory. Dying is the only way out!'

His father grabbed a bottle of pills and thrust them at his son. 'Swallow all 30 pills right now. Everything will be over and you will be dead.'

A terrified Lang Lang ran to the balcony to escape. His father followed: 'If you won't take the pills then jump off! Jump off right now!'

The boy struck back, reflexively. All his life his father had told him that his most precious assets, and the ones that he should protect at all costs, were his hands. The boy started beating them against the walls in the hope he might fracture them.

'I hate my hands. I hate the piano. I hate you.'

Only then did his father stop.

Slowly, he was teased back to the piano again. Thereafter, the protégé carried on and soon swept all before him in competitions. By 13 he was playing Chopin's *Études* at the Beijing Concert Hall and won first place at the Tchaikovsky Competition for Young Musicians in Japan. At 14 he was on Chinese national television playing in front of the Chinese president as a featured soloist with the China National Symphony. Aged 18, he bought a house in Philadelphia for half a million dollars after being accepted to the Curtis Institute of Music.

In China, Lang Lang is mobbed on sight. But sometimes, out of the ever-present glare of the media, he is reminded of his humble origins and the majority who didn't make it in the ferociously competitive world of classical music, where pianists must achieve success as a soloist or face abject failure. 'I was at a hotel in Beijing and I saw one of my competitors playing piano in the bar. This is total humiliation for a concert-trained pianist. 'He was very good, very talented and I wondered what had happened to him.' Lang Lang spoke to the man quietly. 'I didn't want to embarrass him,' he says.

How does he measure success now? Is it still about being number one? When Lang Lang returns home he is sometimes disappointed by the Chinese media. They can't see how he is successful when he doesn't take part

in competitions any more. 'Without a trophy how can you have a career?' one reporter asked him. Lang Lang sighed: 'They only know competitions; that's the way they measure success.'

Lang Lang told him that in America competitions don't matter so much. 'The audiences award me a trophy in their heart,' Lang Lang told the reporter. 'He looked at me as if I was stupid.'

Like so many megastars, Lang Lang yearns for normality. He has long been forbidden from playing basketball – his great love – in case his hands are damaged. In 2004 he did accidentally damage his hand, by hitting the piano he was playing too hard. Unable to play for a while, he found a liberation of sorts. He saw Broadway shows, went to basketball games, took in a Britney Spears concert. 'And I went out with women, dating. So it was fun.' His eyes twinkle with mischief. It was, he says, the only month of 'normality' he has enjoyed.

Soon enough his hand healed and the rigours of life as a concert pianist took over again. Still, he dreams that one day he might water-ski or even sky-dive, although record company executives may throw a fit. 'That's the coolest sport,' he says. 'Just flying around the sky.'

But there are times on his own in his apartment when he transports himself to a different, magical place, far away from obsessed fans and austere conductors. At night, he turns off all the lights and sits at his piano alone, a glass of red wine within easy reach.

'I just let go. I get lost in music,' he says. 'I don't even think about a note, or a need to perform for somebody. It's really the most beautiful moment. You cannot become the owner of the world, but the point is that you gain so much – not power but so many things that you have never experienced in your life.'

In Central Park a growing crowd of thousands awaits Lang Lang's arrival on stage. The concert is to commemorate the opening of the Shanghai Trade Expo and it's rumoured that the Chinese government paid for the show. Lang Lang, an adopted son of the US but a hero at home, has come to symbolise his country's growing superpower status: he escaped poverty at any cost. Controversy stalks him. He threw down a microphone in an interview when a Hong Kong journalist asked what he thought about the furore surrounding a young girl supposedly singing at the Olympics when in fact she was miming. And later on this evening, when the conductor asks if the audience would prefer to hear Lang Lang play Chopin or a Chinese folk song by texting a central number, it's a little hard to believe that the largely Western audience plumps for the propaganda-friendly folk song.

Despite the ongoing controversies and the difficulty with balancing the demands of being a concert pianist with behaving like a rock star, Lang Lang seems remarkably grounded. 'Some people change when they become famous, but my parents always tried to make sure my feet were on the ground. No matter how big or famous you are, or how many honours, my mum said that one day that is not going to be worth anything.'

But he still yearns for approval, just as he did with his father. And he likes those around him to be happy. It's rare you'll find anyone who has met Lang Lang with a bad word to say about him. You have a feeling he simply wants to please.

He must be doing something right. Here on the grass in Central Park the music cascades out of the piano with startling beauty. It's as if he is playing for himself, floating above the city. The notes drift sonorously in the breeze, glissades of sound that make the hairs on my arm stand up. And then, willing it not to end, Lang Lang stands up and faces the light. ■

The album 'Live in Vienna' is out on August 23. It will also be available on DVD and Blu-ray (with 3D film)