

The Roots of Success

Pianist Lang Lang is an international star—but he forged his career here in the U.S., where he moved as a teenager to study and then performed with American orchestras large and small. It was a formative experience that he still values, as he resumes touring, runs a foundation that connects young people around the world with classical music, and takes on new artistic challenges.

By Simon Woods



Craig T. Mathew/Matthew Imaging

Simon Woods, president and CEO of the League of American Orchestras

From the late 1990s to the mid-2000s, I was artistic administrator at the Philadelphia Orchestra. One day in 1998, pianist Gary Graffman, then president of the Curtis Institute of Music, called to tell me about a student—which in itself was already unusual, as Gary didn't have the habit of calling me. I remember his words quite well: "He has a somewhat unusual name, but he's extraordinary, one of the very best students I have ever had in my career, and I wonder if you could arrange for Maestro Sawallisch to hear him play." So I arranged it, and a few weeks later, Lang Lang came to the Academy of Music to play for Philadelphia Orchestra Music Director Wolfgang Sawallisch. I

sat with Sawallisch in the hall, and Lang Lang, then 17, came onstage and played a Haydn sonata followed by the Brahms Op. 118 Pieces. Unusually for Sawallisch in an audition, he didn't interrupt the playing and ask him to jump to the next piece. He let Lang Lang play the whole Brahms set, and at the end he turned to me, raised an eyebrow, and said, "Das war sehr schön" ("That was very beautiful"). Coming from Sawallisch, this was praise indeed. He immediately invited Lang Lang to play with the Philadelphia Orchestra.

In 1999 we had an Asia tour planned, and I tried to persuade the Chinese presenters to take Lang Lang as soloist. After weeks of declining to take an



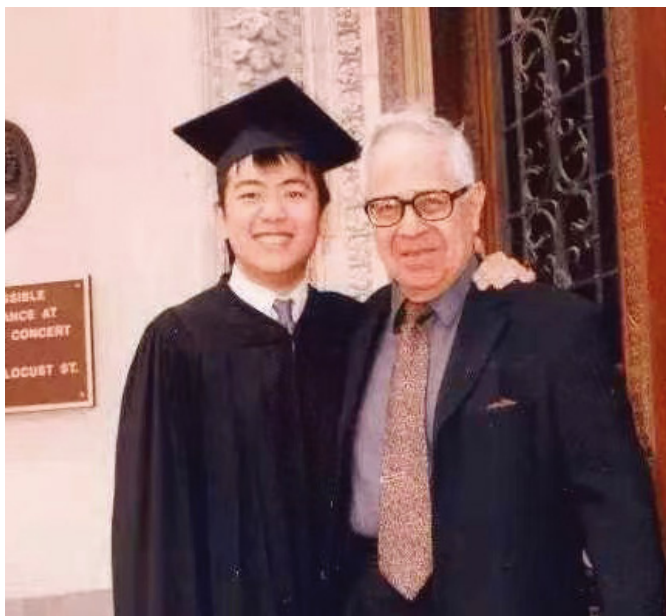
Olaf Heine

Lang Lang in Berlin, 2020.

Courtesy of Lang Lang



Courtesy of Lang Lang



Lang Lang moved from China to Philadelphia as a teenager to study piano at the Curtis Institute with Gary Graffman. At left, early studies with Graffman; right: Lang Lang the Curtis graduate with Graffman, who influenced his playing and aesthetic.

unknown name, they finally relented, and Lang Lang played the Mendelssohn First Piano Concerto with Sawallisch and the Philadelphia Orchestra at the Great Hall of the People's Republic in Beijing. The rest is history. Except not quite...because there's a missing chapter here, which is the way Lang Lang's career was propelled forward by dozens of engagements with smaller American orchestras way before he became an international star.

Recently, Lang Lang sat down with me over Zoom to share his memories of this special time in his life, his affection for Gary Graffman, his deep respect for American orchestras, his commitment to his International Music Foundation and its educational mission, and his journey to playing the *Goldberg* Variations all over the world.

SIMON WOODS: When Gary Graffman called me in 1998 and said, "You've got to hear his amazing student, he may be the best student I've ever had," how old were you?

LANG LANG: I was 15.

SIMON WOODS: Presumably when you started with Gary, you were still adjusting to being in a different country. What was your first impression of being at Curtis and being in America after growing up in China?

LANG LANG: I left China to study with Gary. Studying with him is very different than studying with anybody else, even in America. Gary was not a typical

professor. He's such an open-minded person. He taught me so much beyond American culture. He told me how wonderful the Chinese arts were, and he was even speaking Chinese to me the first semester—the basic things. He could say *crescendo*, *diminuendo*, *dolce*—those musical words in Chinese. He said, "Please play Bach" in Mandarin. He wasn't talking like Chinese people, but he knew some vocabulary, and that's how he communicated with me. I was shocked. I was like, oh wow, somebody's talking Chinese to me.

Gary Graffman was always trying to inspire me to understand the meaning behind music, to never use the same mind to understand things. That is something that I never learned from anybody else.

SIMON WOODS: What was special about how he worked with you and what he did that was different from lessons in China?

LANG LANG: He is a great artist. The way he's showing me the piano, it's not just piano, he's showing me the entire orchestra. I remember he always used the

orchestral sections to make examples of piano sound. He told me, "You cannot make the piano sound. You have to do trumpet. You have to think, this is the Philadelphia Orchestra cello section. You need to think, this is the Chicago Symphony's brass section. You need to think, this is the beautiful sound of the violin section of Vienna Philharmonic." He was always trying to inspire me to understand the meaning behind music. He was always telling me to never use the same mind to understand things. That is something that I never learned from anybody else.

SIMON WOODS: Has that way of thinking about music stayed with you?

LANG LANG: Yes. One thing that's very important was that he's broad-minded with repertoire. When I came to America, I never heard Spanish music before. I never played Brahms before. I played mostly at that time Chopin, Liszt, Tchaikovsky, a lot of Eastern European because the Central Conservatory had strong ties with the Russian school or the Eastern European schools. The repertoire I learned from Central Conservatory in Beijing was mostly Eastern European romantic. I came to America and realized how important Brahms, Debussy, Scarlatti, Handel, Haydn, and other composers are. My repertoire became much bigger. This was thanks to Gary, who didn't want me to keep playing so much Chopin, Tchaikovsky. He said, "You really have to broaden your repertoire." This is why I

Courtesy of lang lang



Lang Lang takes a bow after a 1999 performance with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

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came to America. I had told him, “Gary, I want to win all the competitions in the world.” And he said, “Stop it. You should really focus on learning the repertoire that you are not used to playing.”

SIMON WOODS: Shortly after that, your career started and you began playing with orchestras around America. Tell me about those early experiences and what it felt like to play with an orchestra—with relatively little experience.

LANG LANG: My career was building up with American orchestras—from Lubbock, Texas to Garden State Philharmonic in New Jersey, and Longview, Texas. There are a lot of wonderful places. I remember going to Lubbock, Texas—me and my father switching three different airplanes and then taking the bus. My father said to me, “Wow, your American tour is really adventurous.” Going to New Mexico, we landed in Albuquerque and then switched to a car ride to Roswell. I loved those experiences. I love to play with those wonderful musicians like

South Bend, Indiana, the Fresno Philharmonic, the Fort Collins Symphony, the Colorado Springs Philharmonic.

SIMON WOODS: What was your impression of playing with regional American orchestras? How did you find the musicians, how did you find the atmosphere and the welcome?

LANG LANG: In the beginning, obviously as any musician you want to play with the biggest ones—New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Cleveland, Boston, LA, San Francisco. But in the beginning, I was the number five or six replacement on the Milwaukee and Indianapolis symphony lists. And probably number ten on the Philadelphia Orchestra sub list. My first time playing Beethoven Piano Concerto No. 4, I played with South Bend Symphony, and that was really great because I didn’t know that concerto well. I remember going to Lafayette and New Orleans in Louisiana, and Birmingham, Alabama. My first time playing the Mozart C Minor Concerto was in Lubbock, Texas. Those orchestras really played their hearts out for me.

SIMON WOODS: Did you get a sense of how beloved these orchestras are in their communities? One of the beautiful things about American orchestras is this intense local pride.

LANG LANG: Absolutely. My first performance of Beethoven’s Third Piano Concerto was in Longview, Texas. The community was so welcoming. In the very beginning of my career, I always stayed

in somebody’s home—a couple of music lovers would take in young musicians, let them and their parents stay in their home. I could practice at their home. They loved music, they loved helping young musicians. In Longview, after the performance we went to a community Sunday brunch. Everybody was talking about the concert. It was amazing how the community loved their orchestra. We’re talking about music and they’re showing me the local food and nature. In Louisiana, a young couple and their daughter took me to the river after I played Beethoven’s First Piano Concerto. I remember the little girl was like, “Hey Lang Lang, there’s an alligator!”

SIMON WOODS: In a way we could say that in the beginning of your career you were “made in America.” Is there anything in particular that is individual or unusual compared to other places in the world where you work?

LANG LANG: You have so many different nationalities in U.S. orchestras, you basically see almost a U.N. orchestra. In many U.S. orchestras, you see people from everywhere, and they graduate maybe mostly from the American conservatories, from Curtis to Eastman to Colburn to Cincinnati. It’s truly international, and this is something that looks very different than the rest of the world.

The pandemic really showed how fortunate we are to be musicians.

SIMON WOODS: What does that do to the sound and personality of American orchestras? Does it mean that they're more versatile?

LANG LANG: I think American orchestra can play more styles than the rest of the world. If you take an orchestra like Philadelphia Orchestra, they can do amazing Russian music, incredible Germanic repertoire, and also a lot of contemporary music. In a way, American orchestras are more multi-talented and much more open toward popular culture. This is quite different than other parts of the world.

SIMON WOODS: One of the things that has been very meaningful for you in your career has been giving back to young people. Tell me about the Lang Lang International Music Foundation, and particularly about your Young Scholars program. What are you trying to achieve there?

LANG LANG: We have two key programs: Young Scholars and Keys of Inspiration. With Keys of Inspiration, the idea is to provide music classes to American schools, and to schools in China and Europe, although we are focused more into the public school system in this country. We know it's very challenging, because many schools in the U.S. don't teach music. This is something that we are trying to change. At the moment, we have more than 70 schools in the U.S. taking our program. The idea is that everybody should play the piano—not just listen. We want them to play together, and therefore in each of the schools we have around 30 smart pianos. When the



Taking a bow at his September 2021 performance of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 3 with the National Symphony Orchestra at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. Thomas Wilkins led the concert.

teachers are teaching it's almost like a DJ. He has headphones and everybody else has earphones. He talks to each student, and each one practices with the music on the screen of the iPad. People are learning music in a very enjoyable way, almost like playing a game. When they play with only one hand, they have the entire orchestra accompany them. When they play the left hand, they have the entire orchestra accompanying them or doing the melody parts. That way, when they start playing, they don't feel they are by themselves, and they don't get disconnected. There's a little community, learning music at the same time, almost like a conversation. They can also sing and create. This is the way I think music should be presented.

SIMON WOODS: You have the technology up and running in 70 schools. So what comes next? How do you take talented students and advance them?

LANG LANG: On top of this Keys of Inspiration program, we have another one called Young Scholars, which is nurturing the next generation of prodigies. They are the best young pianists from around the U.S. between the ages of 6 and 16 years old. Every year, we provide them a performance in Weill Recital Hall or Zankel Hall at Carnegie Hall. Some of them play with me or another touring artist in Royal Albert Hall, Carnegie Hall, Chicago's Orchestra Hall, or Walt Disney Concert Hall. They have a chance to shine on stage, and they also become ambassadors for our Keys of Inspiration

It took me more than 25 years to be ready to play the *Goldberg Variations*.

programs. We're trying to have inspiration from different generations passing this wonderful flame.

SIMON WOODS: Have you started to think about partnerships between your program and orchestras?

LANG LANG: Yes, we had some collaboration in the past with orchestras, like the Seattle Symphony and Vancouver Symphony. I'm doing another program called 101 Pianist Festival, where we get 100 pianists together, including one more—sometimes me, sometimes someone else. We play like a piano symphony! We are teaming up with orchestras around the world and we're trying to create this piano symphony everywhere we go.

SIMON WOODS: Let's talk about the pandemic. When we were talking last, you said this was a time of deep reflection for you. Everybody's had their own particular experiences of the pandemic. Tell me what it was like for you.

LANG LANG: The pandemic really showed how fortunate we are to be musicians. During the pandemic, my professional colleagues and I were quite depressed, and worried that we would never get back on stage. This was a very



Lang Lang in St. Thomas Church, Leipzig, for his performance of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*.



Heather Janier

Lang Lang's International Music Foundation aims to connect young people around the world with classical music. Here, he works with students in the U.S.

sad, very dark period, very difficult for musicians. I was fortunate to perform several concerts in China during this time, but it was a very limited number. Some of the European festivals did concerts, again very limited.

I remember a few incredible concerts that musicians did in a castle or a church on their own. That was very touching. But obviously you cannot do this for long. Thank God, this year we are able to come back. At the first concert after we were allowed to be onstage, everybody was crying. That was an emotional time.

I want to send all my love and gratitude to American orchestras, and to the people who believed me in the very beginning—which started with American orchestras.

SIMON WOODS: Did you use this period to study new repertoire, think up new ideas?

LANG LANG: Yes. I also was practicing a lot of new pieces. But the most important work during this time was the birth of my son. This is probably the most important work my wife and I ever did.

SIMON WOODS: What lies in the future? Do you have musical ambitions that you'd like to fulfill? You've done everything, you've played the major repertoire with the greatest orchestras and done incredible media projects.

LANG LANG: This current tour is very important because it's the Bach *Goldberg* Variations. I've been dreaming to play this piece from ten years old, and to play the *Goldberg* Variations all over the world is a dream come true.

SIMON WOODS: Why did you wait so long?

LANG LANG: This piece is incredibly hard to understand. It's Baroque music, not even written for the piano, it's for harpsichord, also with a lot of Baroque organ technique. I needed to learn authentic ways of understanding and analyzing this type of music, and how the ornamentation works in French and Italian style. After learning that, I needed time to digest. Like a good red wine, it needs some time. It took me more than 25 years to be ready.

SIMON WOODS: Did it challenge you to think in new ways about your technique?

LANG LANG: Absolutely. There is also the strategy of how to handle this—I never played any piece longer than 45 minutes, and this is 90 minutes without break. It's another game altogether.

SIMON WOODS: This magazine is for American orchestras, for musicians, managers, people who love American orchestras. What's your message to American orchestras?

LANG LANG: This is a very difficult time for all of us. But I want to send all my love and gratitude to the great American orchestras, and to the people who believed me in the very beginning—which started with American orchestras. This has been a great journey with you all, and I can't wait to have more wonderful musical experiences in the future with you. **S**



Courtesy of Lang Lang

Lang Lang with young participants in his Keys of Inspiration music program.