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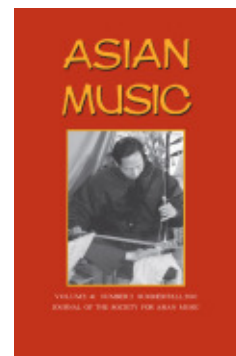
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Performing “Chineseness” on the Western Concert Stage: The Case of Lang Lang¹

Eric Hung

Over the past 4 decades, Asian American performers of Western classical music have become a major force in the music industry. Among their ranks are A-list soloists, such as Sarah Chang and Yo-Yo Ma, members of world-renowned chamber groups, such as the siblings that make up the Ying Quartet, and concert-masters of such major ensembles as the Chicago Symphony and the Philadelphia Orchestra.

Arts administrators and admissions officers of music schools noticed the enormous influx of Asian Americans into classical music by the 1970s. Soon after, journalists began to write about it. In a 1980 *New York Times* article entitled “Oriental Musicians Come of Age,” Leslie Rubinstein noted that 40 percent of the total enrollment (and two-thirds of the pianists) at Juilliard’s precollege division was of Asian descent (Rubinstein 1980). Eight years later, John Rockwell wrote a fascinating article in which he argued that the influx of classical musicians of Asian descent was changing what he called the “New York sound.” He asserts, “It might be argued that there hasn’t been such a rewarding cultural synthesis in the classical performing arts as that currently taking place between Asian students and New York teachers and overall urban spirit since the blend of Russian passion and Jewish soul that characterized many of the great instrumentalists of earlier in the century” (Rockwell 1988).

Despite Asian Americans’ visibility in Western classical music, scholars of Asian American culture have until very recently ignored this phenomenon. There have been a few conference presentations on this topic by such scholars as Maiko Kawabata (2004), Roe-Min Kok (2006), and Mari Yoshihara (2006) over the past 5 years, but substantial publications have only arrived in the past year (Yang 2007; Yoshihara 2007). With this article, I aim to add to this growing literature by examining one Chinese American performer, Lang Lang, and his performances of “Chineseness.”

At 26, Lang Lang is one of the most sought-after pianists of our time. Born in Shenyang in northern China, Lang began studying piano when he was three and entered the Central Conservatory in Beijing when he was nine. After winning the Tchaikovsky Young Musicians Competition in 1995, he enrolled at the

Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, where he still lives. Lang's big break came in August 1999, when he substituted for an indisposed Andre Watts at a Chicago Symphony gala concert. Since then, he has performed with most of the world's greatest orchestras and recorded ten CDs for Telarc and Deutsche Grammophon.

Although I play piano and attend concerts of Western classical music, I do not generally pay much attention to rising stars. As a result, I did not follow Lang's career until an aunt asked me what I thought of his playing about 3 years ago. During this rather one-sided conversation (let's say that she is not Lang's biggest fan), my aunt expressed dismay at the pianist's concert dress. She had just watched the video of the Verbier Festival's Piano Extravaganza concert in 2003 (see Figure 1), and she was put off by Lang's decision to wear a traditional Chinese gown. For her, this was a clear example of the pianist's "style-over-substance" attitude.

My aunt is, of course, partially right. In a candid interview with Mark McCord of the *South China Morning Post*, Lang readily acknowledges that some of the critical attention he has received is due to the fact that he is Chinese and not "from the West" (McCord 2002). Given that he is a great showman—just watch his gestures as he prepares for particularly hard entrances in concertos—one can hardly doubt that he plays up his Chineseness in part to garner even more press. Why else would he wear a Chinese gown for the Verbier Festival gala?

Given the extensiveness of Lang's Chinese projects and his statements, however, one must recognize that additional attention is not his only motive. In the aforementioned *South China Morning Post* article, Lang tells McCord, "Two hundred years ago the German school was very important, then there were the French, Russian and even the American schools. Now I want there to be a Chinese school." He continues later in the interview, "Unlike the old schools, which restricted themselves to the styles of their own cultures, I would like to see a cross-cultural school established, one that borrows from the East and the West to produce concertos or sonatas like the world has never seen" (McCord 2002). McCord states that Lang believes there to be a "groundswell of interest in Asian arts and culture" in the United States and "enough Asian classical music talents to form the core of a viable movement." He further relates that Lang "envisages a time when a conservatory will teach students the erhu and the piano, back to back" (McCord 2002).

This is the earliest public discussion I have found that reveals Lang's dream of a Chinese school of classical music, but it is by no means the last. In the past 5 years, he has repeated and elaborated upon these ideas in a number of newspaper interviews and television appearances. In a 2003 interview with Michael Church of *The Independent*, Lang states, "Chinese people love the piano, but they must



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Figure 1. Cover of Verbier Festival 10th Anniversary Piano Extravaganza DVD. Lang is wearing a traditional Chinese gown (see arrow).

do their own thing with it. People in the West should know that the Chinese are coming” (Church 2003). Four years later, he said the following to Daniel Wakin of *The New York Times*: “Two hundred years ago it was Europe. A hundred years ago it was America. Fifty years ago it was Japan. And now it’s China” (Wakin 2007). Lang’s insistence that there should or needs to be a Chinese school has in fact led his rival and compatriot Li Yundi to respond, “There’s no such thing as the Chinese School anymore, or Russian School or French. People should just play as they are” (Shzr Ee Tan 2003).

The Double Loss of Chinese Tradition

The diverging attitudes of Lang and Li, who spent several years studying in Germany, toward a Chinese school of Western classical music reflect the many different attitudes musicians in the Chinese diaspora have toward Chinese history and tradition. Although Li regularly performs Chinese works in his recitals, he generally allows his ethnicity to speak for itself; he does not emphasize his Chineseness in interviews or his publicity photos. In contrast, Lang rarely allows you to forget his ethnicity (see Figure 2), and I argue that his emphasis on “Chineseness” is based to a considerable extent on a sense of nostalgia and loss that many first-generation immigrants experience.²

In the program booklet of the *Dragon Songs* album, which will be discussed at greater length later, Lang reveals his nostalgia for his childhood in China. He compares the melodies of the works on the album to “fairytales,” and states



Figure 2. Lang Lang and his piano at the Great Wall (publicity photo).

that “whenever my relatives got together [in Shenyang], we would have family concerts . . . I did a lot of mixing of traditions when I was a kid, and that’s what I’ve tried to do on this album” (quoted in Holloway 2006, 8). In Lang’s case, this sense of nostalgia and loss is compounded by the fact that the family concerts themselves were an attempt to recover Chinese tradition in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. His erhu-playing father, Lang Guo-ren, who was 12 at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, has said that all the sacrifices he made to ensure his son’s success—that includes quitting his job and moving to Beijing when Lang Lang was 9 years old—were based upon his own nostalgic desire to be a musical star. In a DVD interview, he baldly states:

Because I didn’t succeed in my career, I always tried to lead and influence [Lang Lang]. I wanted him to achieve what I couldn’t. He was to do what our generation didn’t have the chance to. I passed on my ideals and my goals and now my son carries on my career and makes the dreams come true in place of me. (Mirow 2006, chapter 8)

Baby Steps

So, how is Lang bringing his goal of a Chinese school of Western classical music into reality? I argue that the first steps involve highlighting and performing “Chineseness” on stage in three ways. First, as I have already discussed, he emphasizes his Chineseness by frequently wearing traditional Chinese clothing at his concerts. For solo recitals, he often wears a tuxedo during one half of the concert and something Chinese during the other half.³ This is perhaps an attempt to show that he is both Chinese and Western.

Second, Lang stresses his “Chineseness” by playing a variety of works by Chinese and Chinese American composers. These pieces sometimes appear on the program, but more often they are given as encores. What is particularly significant is that Lang often reveals very little about these works other than the fact that they are Chinese. When he plays them as encores, he often introduces them by saying “a Chinese folk song” or a similar phrase without providing a title or the name of the composer or arranger.⁴ Similarly, on his official website, Lang advertises his early 2008 recital program as the “Mozart, Schumann, Traditional Chinese Works, Granados, Liszt Recital.” The Carnegie Hall website even includes the titles of the European works:

Mozart: Sonata in B-flat Major, K. 333

Schumann: Fantasy in C Major, Op. 17

Traditional Chinese Works

Granados: “Los requiebors” from *Goyescas*, Book 1

Liszt: Isolde’s Liebestod from Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*

Liszt: Hungarian Rhapsody No. 6 in D Major, “Carnival in Pesth”

Yet, the identities of the Chinese works remain anonymous. This is a point I will return to later.

Third, Lang often performs a duet with his father as an encore. Watching them, it is apparent that the two seem to have a lot of fun playing together.⁵ It also gives them the opportunity to introduce the *erhu* to Western audiences. Yet, when asked why he performs this duet, Lang often provides less obvious answers—ones that accentuate his “Chineseness” by demonstrating his devotion to the Confucian ideal of filial piety. He tells interviewers, for example, that his father “loves it” and that he is “carrying on our family tradition of giving little concerts” (Zhao 2003; Dart 2004).

Dragon Songs: What is “Traditional”?

Having established his Chinese identity with Western audiences, Lang took a much bigger step toward establishing a Chinese school of classical music by releasing *Dragon Songs* in 2006. This is a duo-disc that includes a compact disc of what Lang calls “Chinese traditional music” and a DVD that contains a documentary about Lang’s 2005 concert tour of China, a series of mini-lectures in which Lang introduces most of the works on the CD, and video recordings of all 11 pieces. In the accompanying booklet, Lang describes the autobiographical nature of this project and his desire to introduce Chinese music to his Western audience:

I grew up in a family of musicians—my father is an *erhu* player, and my grandfather played the Chinese flute and a Chinese lute called the *pipa*. Whenever my relatives got together, we would have family concerts, with me at the piano—I tried playing the Chinese violin, but I was hopeless! I did a lot of mixing of traditions when I was a kid, and that’s what I’ve tried to do on this album. I hope it will open a door to Chinese culture and music for my audience. These melodies are heard all over China: I’ve known them since I was a baby. My mother would sing them, my father would play them. They were like fairytales for me. (quoted in Holloway 2006, 8)

Later on, he puts this CD in the context of his ultimate goal of developing a Chinese school that mixes elements of Chinese and Western cultures. He states, “I love the idea of making connections between Chinese culture and the rest of the world. . . . For this recording I’ve chosen some wonderful examples of *Chinese traditional music*. There’s so much more, of course, but for a first try, this should do” (italics added; quoted in Holloway 2006, 9).

Although I believe Lang when he states that he knew most of these pieces’ melodies since he was a baby, a quick inspection of the contents (see Figure 3) also reveals that he has conveniently adopted a rather broad definition of “Chinese traditional music.” Included on this CD, most glaringly, is the *Yellow River Concerto*, a Cultural Revolution propaganda work based on a cantata composed by Xian Xinghai in 1939. Moreover, many of the composers featured

Tracks 1-4:	Xian Xinghai (1905-1945), arr. Yin Chengzong, Chu Wanghua, Liu Zhang and Sheng Lihong <i>Yellow River Concerto</i> (with the China Philharmonic Orchestra, Chen Shasha—Chinese flute, Wu Yuxia—pipa, Long Yu—conductor)
Track 5:	Lü Wencheng (1898-1981), arr. Chen Peixun (b. 1921) <i>Autumn Moon on a Calm Lake</i>
Track 6:	He Luting (1903-1999) <i>The Cowherd’s Flute</i>
Track 7:	Traditional, arr. Huang Anlun (b. 1949) <i>Dialogue in Song</i>
Track 8:	Sun Yiqiang (b. c1945) <i>Dance of Spring</i>
Track 9:	Du Mingxin (b. 1928), arr. Wu Zuqiang (b. 1927) <i>“Straw Hat Dance” from The Mermaid Suite</i>
Track 10:	Deng Yuxian (1906-44), arr. Xiao Tairan (b. 1938) <i>Spring Wind</i>
Track 11:	Zhu Jianer (b. 1922), arr. Chu Wanghua (b. 1941) <i>Happy Times</i>
Track 12:	Traditional, arr. Wu Zuqiang (b. 1927) <i>Spring Flowers in the Moonlit Night on the River</i> (with Fan Wei—pipa)
Track 13:	Zhao Jiping (b. 1945) <i>“Dance from Quici” from The Silk Road Suite</i> (with Zhang Jiali—guzhen)
Track 14:	Wang Jianmin (b. 1956) <i>At Night on the Lake Beneath the Maple Bridge</i> (with Ji Wei—guzheng)

Figure 3. Contents of *Dragon Songs* CD.

on this recording were never “traditional musicians” in any way commonly understood by Westerners, who are Lang’s target and primary audience.⁶ Du Mingxin (b. 1928) was trained at the Tchaikovsky Conservatory in Moscow and is known primarily for his ballets and symphonic works. Similarly, Zhu Jianer (b. 1922) studied in Moscow and spent most of his career writing film music and symphonic works.

In short, the pieces on this album are not what most Americans and Western Europeans would call “traditional music,” with its implications of oral culture and ancient roots. They are, instead, examples of *guoyue* (“national music”), a style developed by conservatory-trained musicians in the early 20th century. Works in this style employ primarily Western instruments and harmonic vocabularies, but attempt to evoke a pan-national “Chineseness” through the synthesis of characteristics of different regional musics throughout the country. It is perhaps not surprising that Lang calls the pieces on *Dragon Songs* “Chinese traditional music”; until recently, *guoyue* was the only type of “Chinese music” taught at Chinese conservatories.

What is significant here is Lang's attempt to evoke the Western idea of "traditional music" when he discusses *guoyue*. As I noted above, Lang frequently introduced his encores and advertised compositions like the ones on this CD simply as "Chinese folk songs" and "traditional Chinese works." In the mini-lectures on the *Dragon Songs* DVD, he historicizes several works, telling us that He Luting's *The Cowherd's Flute* was the piece that won the first Chinese prize for a piano composition, that Zhu Jianer's *Happy Times* was written at the end of the Second World War, and that Du Mingxin was trained in the Soviet Union and is one of many Chinese composers who were heavily influenced by Russian music. At the same time, Lang takes every opportunity to evoke the ancient nature of this music. At the end of the lecture on *Spring Flowers in the Moonlit Night on the River*, one of two anonymous works on the CD, Lang states, "This is the problem with lots of Chinese music. You don't really know who's the composer because it's just like telling fairytales. The fairytale is passed to another generation, to another generation, to another generation, you know, but nobody knows who created this" (chapter 21). Later, when discussing *At Night on the Lake Beneath the Maple Bridge*, Lang says that although the work was written "by a modern composer," it was composed "in a very old way" (chapter 23). As we shall see, this blurring of *guoyue* with the Western notion of "traditional music" has had a tremendous impact on the reception of Lang's Chinese project.

The notion of "traditional Chinese music," which Lang blurs in his video lectures, is made even murkier in the program booklet and the DVD documentary. The longest item in the program booklet is an essay by German composer Karsten Gunderman on the history of the piano in China. Although this essay clearly demonstrates the close connections between politics and music in recent Chinese history, its attempts to emphasize the "traditional" nature of Chinese piano music make this history rather confusing. Early on in the essay, Gunderman discusses the 1934 competition that Russian composer Alexander Tcherepnin organized for new piano works by Chinese composers, which was won by the aforementioned He Luting. Later on, however, he suggests that, until the end of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese composers of piano music only arranged older material. He states:

With the passage of time, the horrors of the Cultural Revolution gradually faded from memory . . . [t]his was a period that witnessed the composition of many of the Chinese piano pieces that continue to be played today. Years of interest in traditional melodies, the imitation of folk instruments on the piano and their combination with performance techniques specific to the piano created an indigenous Chinese culture whose products were not arrangements of existing works but original pieces in their own right, pieces that have immeasurably enriched the country's concert repertoire. The infinite variety of Chinese folk music guaranteed an abundance of different styles. (Gunderman 2006, 12)

Interestingly, Gunderman cites as an example of this post-Cultural Revolution style Xiao Tairan’s arrangement of *Spring Wind*. This work, which was originally a part of a film score, was originally composed by Deng Yuxian (1905–1944), who some call the “Father of Taiwanese Pop Music.”⁷ One wonders whether Gunderman would consider this film music and particularly its rather generically pentatonic melody—to my ears, it could pass as a folk tune of many different traditions—to be an example of Chinese folk music.

This confusion about what is “traditionally Chinese” is exacerbated by the documentary on the companion DVD, entitled *Dragon Songs: Lang Lang in China*. Directed by Benedict Mirow, this 45-minute promotional film presents revealing portraits of Lang’s childhood years and his evolving relationship with his parents. It also provides insightful commentaries on the roles that Western classical music and institutions are playing in contemporary China. Mixed with these informative segments, however, are fanciful moments about a long-standing and unchanging Chinese culture. About a third of the way through the film, for example, a narrator gives the following monologue, accompanied at least initially by shots of the Great Wall and old temples:

China, the Middle Kingdom: home to over a fifth of the world’s population. It can look back to a long history of civilization and culture, extending over six thousand years. And while passing through multiple dynasties and forms of government, it remained culturally independent for millennia. The cultural life of this vast country is marked by an acute awareness of its own strength. The increasing significance of the part that China plays on the stage of international politics is reflected in the ways its citizens see themselves. Their own history is a source of constant inspiration. Though the Western lifestyle has long since pervaded daily living, the link with their own culture and history is a prerequisite for success in China. Even in Beijing, life is lived largely on the streets and for most people it’s shaped by tradition. (chapter 4)

Toward the end of the film, the filmmakers also wasted no opportunity to shore up Lang’s Chinese identity—in particular, his devotion to filial piety. In one scene, the narrator tells us that Lang is fulfilling his “long-nurtured dream” of paying tribute to his grandparents and other ancestors by going to a temple and burning “hell money” and a “golden crown” (chapter 10). Later, he is shown dedicating a piece to all parents during his recital at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing.

In the end, a thorough examination of all the contents of the *Dragon Songs* duo-disc is bound to leave one confused, as there are just so many contradictions. One is left wondering what “traditional Chinese music” is, how “traditional” China is today, what the characteristics of Chinese music are, and what musical innovations there have been since the Cultural Revolution. This

uncertainty has led several critics to make factual errors in their reviews. For example, Arthur Kaptainis from the *Montreal Gazette* writes that most of the works on this CD are from the Mao era, which is not true (Kaptainis 2007). Similarly, Jed Distler of *Gramophone* incorrectly states that the CD consists of “traditional Chinese songs from several generations arranged by Chinese composers” (Distler 2007). The CD in fact includes several original works by modern Chinese composers.

Dragon Songs: Understanding the Confusion

China went through a terrible nightmare over the last 150 years. Our creative standing in the world was lost, compared to the past, when China was a powerful country. But [the *Yellow River Concerto*] helped to bring back our energy and self-confidence. It was like a wake-up call from the nightmare, a reminder that we would do great things again. It has a special meaning for me. I get very emotional when I play it because it's part of my culture, and I am really proud of this heritage.

—Lang Lang (quoted in Holloway 2006)

So, is there a purpose behind the contradictions and the confusion? Given Lang's ultimate goal of establishing a Chinese school of classical music, I suspect that there is. In order to establish a Chinese school—even one that is explicitly interested in cross-cultural interactions—one needs to define what “Chineseness” is. I believe that a key goal of *Dragon Songs*—what Lang calls “a first try” at presenting Chinese music to Western audiences—is to find or establish the essence of “Chineseness” in music (quoted in Holloway 2006). To put it slightly differently, *Dragon Songs* seeks to discover the foundations on which a Chinese school of classical music can be built—a set of characteristics that do not depend upon the ever-changing landscape of Chinese politics. Given the emphasis that Lang places on melodies and timbres in his mini-lectures, it appears that he locates “Chineseness” in music primarily in these two elements.

If my speculations are true, then Lang's assertion that he has recorded an album of “Chinese traditional music” makes more sense. If he locates “Chineseness” solely in terms of musical characteristics, as I suspect, he is able to apply the “traditional” label to music with very different social functions. In this way, he is able to call all the works on *Dragon Songs*—whether they are 20th and 21st century concert music, arrangements of folk music, ballets, or film music—“traditional.” These works would then form the foundation on which Lang wants to build the new Chinese school.

My interpretation also offers some explanation for one of Lang's more enigmatic statements about *Dragon Songs*, which I quoted at the beginning of this

section. Although I recognize that the *Yellow River Concerto* is indeed a beloved work for Chinese audiences and the only Chinese piano concerto with an international reputation, Lang’s statements seem to go much farther. One wonders how a nonpropaganda writer can, with hindsight, state that a work from the Cultural Revolution is like a “wake-up call from the nightmare” of China’s recent history. Given that Lang largely ignores the social contexts of the other works he records, these statements become more understandable. Here, he seems to remove the *Yellow River Concerto* from the specific circumstances of the Cultural Revolution, and instead use it to define the Chinese spirit, which exists independently of historical circumstances.

If *Dragon Songs* lays the foundation for a future Chinese school, what type of superstructure is he envisioning? For this question, Lang leaves few clues. By calling *Dragon Songs* a “first try,” he implies that the *guoyue* style—essentially Chinese-style melodies with Western accompaniment—is not what he has in mind. On the other hand, Lang often discusses his collaboration with Tan Dun, whose Piano Concerto he recently premiered, and his interest in Yo-Yo Ma’s Silk Road Project. Also of note is the surprising absence of Chou Wen-Chung (b. 1923) in Lang’s many interviews. Chou is, after all, not only Tan Dun’s (and many other younger Chinese American composers’) composition teacher at Columbia, but also a significant pioneer in innovative East-West crossovers.⁸

Receiving Lang’s Chineseness

In August 2001, Lang made his debut at the Proms, the gigantic summer festival of Western classical music in London, performing Rachmaninoff’s Third Piano Concerto with the St. Petersburg Philharmonic Orchestra. When the concerto was over, Lang returned to the stage and announced an encore. He shouted into the enormous Royal Albert Hall, “A Chinese Folk Song!” and the audience burst into a hearty laughter.⁹ Although he received tremendous applause at the end of the encore, this moment unfortunately demonstrates how much discomfort Western classical music audiences in North America and Europe continue to feel whenever Asian cultures and peoples are mentioned.¹⁰ Given this environment, Lang’s efforts to promote Chinese music and ultimately build a Chinese school of Western classical music are both comprehensible and commendable; unfortunately, their effectiveness is also questionable.

In *Speak It Louder*, Deborah Wong’s pioneering book on Asian American musicians, she repeatedly explores the huge gulf that often exists between the intentions of activist musicians and the messages received by their audiences. In

particular, she wonders how artists can overcome “the susceptibility of American audiences to orientalist pleasure”—delightful responses that are based upon racist stereotypes of Asians (Wong 2004, 215). Not surprisingly, she argues that although artists can attempt to preempt these responses within their works, there are no easy solutions to the problem.

After surveying newspaper and magazine reviews of Lang’s performances and encores, it quickly becomes clear that Lang has had limited success in overcoming an “orientalist” response to his “Chinese” projects. A large segment of his audiences simply cannot take Lang’s desires to introduce Chinese music to Western audiences and moreover to incorporate Chinese music into the Western concert hall seriously. When Lang plays solo Chinese music as encores, newspaper and magazine critics most often ignore them. Although not mentioning encores in reviews is not uncommon, one can find many instances where reviewers ignore the Chinese work but discuss other encores (Jones 2001; Fairman 2001). Of the reviewers who do discuss the Chinese encores, some find them “jolly” and “delightful,” but others are as dismissive as they can possibly be. Christopher Morley of the *Birmingham Post*, for example, calls Lang’s performance of Wang Jian-Zhong’s arrangement of *Liu Yang River* “a something-and-nothing Chinese encore” (Morley 2002).

To date, *Dragon Songs* has had very mixed reviews from Western critics. Many have praised his playing, and some laud Lang for “veering off the mainstream” and remark that he is returning to “his musical roots” (Terauds 2007; Rye 2007). At the same time, few critics have bought Lang’s claim that the works on the CD are examples of “Chinese traditional music.” Instead, many treat the shorter pieces—often with some justification—as pure orientalism or *chinoiserie*. Matthew Rye of London’s *The Daily Telegraph* states that these works are “characterized by traditional Chinese modal melody dressed in Western garb,” and William Dart of the *New Zealand Herald* writes, “The *habanera* of Sun Yiqiang’s ‘Dance of Spring’ suggests Carmen is alive and castanetting somewhere in China, while Du Mingxin’s ‘Straw Hat Dance’ has Bartók bumping into Grieg on the banks of the Yangtze” (Rye 2007; Dart 2007). Meanwhile, some critics completely reject Lang’s belief that these types of Chinese music are worthy of the Western concert stage. The most extreme example is Geoff Brown of London’s *The Times*, who writes:

To Lang Lang and his Chinese audiences, the value in these descriptive pieces, largely based on folk compositions, stretches way beyond the aesthetic. They nourish in ways that Europeans cannot fathom. For Europeans listening only with ears, not hearts, the experience is entirely different. From our aesthetic, these pieces are terrible—laughably so in the fake Rachmaninov glitter of the famous *Yellow River Piano Concerto*, a corporate project from the Cultural Revolution, commissioned

by Mao Zedong’s wife. Lang Lang, with the China Philharmonic Orchestra, dispatches the bauble with a shameless aplomb that would make even Liberace blush. In *Autumn Moon on a Calm Lake*, all the arpeggios in the world come home to roost. For three items, traditional instruments join in—a lute, a double-reed pipe, a zither—varying the sound world but never upping the music’s quality. In one ear and out the other; that’s the way it goes. (Brown 2007)

Although the bigotry inherent in Brown’s quote needs little analysis, one must ask why Lang’s “Chinese” project has had so little success to date.

Given the long history of orientalism and imperialism, it is perhaps unfair for anyone to expect quick results from Lang’s efforts. That said, I will conclude by proposing three reasons why his project has not been as successful as it could have been. First, as I discussed earlier, the *Dragon Songs* CD does not provide what Westerners expect when they hear the term “Chinese traditional music.” This allows audiences who have not encountered the *guoyue* tradition to fall back upon orientalist notions with which they are already familiar. Second, Lang has not made it convenient for those who were interested in his CD to pursue Chinese music further. To help his audience, he can, in the CD liner notes or on his website, provide suggestions for further listening, and list books and websites where one can learn more about Chinese music and culture. He can even tell us how one can obtain scores of the pieces he recorded.

Third, and most importantly, Lang is a “superstar” and needs to be marketed as such. In the current market, orientalism sells, and Lang and his marketing team have exoticized him throughout his career to ensure that he maximizes his stardom. This is accomplished in part by his frequent use of traditional Chinese gowns for concerts and by his allusions to such traditionally Chinese concepts as filial piety. For the *Dragon Songs* album, Deutsche Grammophon decided to use particularly “orientalized” photos of Lang in the CD booklet. There are three large photos, and Lang does not look directly at the viewer in any of them. On the cover photo (see Figure 4), for example, he is looking up at you, which puts him in a lower or emasculated position relative to the viewer. Meanwhile, his “otherness” is reinforced by his hands, which are in a quasi-Buddhist prayer position, and the backdrop, which consists of splashes of ink somewhat reminiscent of Chinese calligraphy.

Although I criticize Lang for playing into Orientalist stereotypes, I understand that he faces a difficult conundrum. On the one hand, his exotic image undermines his goal of promoting Chinese music and building a Chinese school of Western classical music. On the other hand, he might lose a significant segment of his audience if he marketed himself in other ways. Without a large audience base, his extremely ambitious project would also fail.¹¹



Figure 4. Cover photo of *Dragon Songs*.

In the end, *Dragon Songs* is only “a first try” by an idealistic 24-year old. I will keep my eyes open to see how this project proceeds from here.

Westminster Choir College of Rider University

Notes

¹ Earlier versions of this article were presented at the 2007 Society for Ethnomusicology Annual Meeting in Columbus, the 2007 College Music Society National Meeting in Salt Lake City, and the 2008 Canadian University Music Society Meeting in Vancouver. The author would like to thank Mandi Magnuson-Hung, Marshall Onofrio, Stephen Slawek, and Andi Eng for their suggestions on earlier drafts.

² See, for example, Kim (1982) for an analysis of generational traits in Asian American literature.

³ See, for example, Lang (2003). Having soloists change in the middle of the concert is fairly common in much of East Asia. Nonetheless, a number of Western critics have commented on Lang’s use of Chinese clothing.

⁴ For a recording that catches this practice, listen to track 4 of Lang (2002).

⁵ This is available on Lang (2003).

⁶ Lang states that this music “might be new to Westerners, but not for the Chinese people who have developed it through 5,000 years of history. I hope through this record that people will learn more about Chinese culture and take an interest in it” (quoted in Natalie Tan 2007). Originally, Deutsche Grammophon wanted to release this recording for the Chinese market only. Lang, however, managed to convince the company to release it worldwide (see *China Daily* 2006).

⁷ Taiwanese Hakka writer Zhong Zhaozheng in fact based his novel *The Waiting for Spring Wind* (1977) on the life of Deng Yuxian.

⁸ See Chang (2006) for a description of Chou’s contributions to East-West fusions.

⁹ Lang’s announcement and the resulting laughter can be heard on *Lang at the Proms* CD.

¹⁰ I attended a King’s Singers concert last year in Princeton, and the audience also burst into laughter when one of the singers announced that they were going to sing a set of songs by the American composer Jackson Hill with Japanese lyrics. To this singer’s credit, he scolded this audience by stating, “That is not funny.” For a thorough discussion of the discrimination faced by Asian and Asian American musicians, see Yang (2007).

¹¹ Although I emphasize the idealistic/philosophical nature of Lang’s project, I am fully aware of the commercial and consumerist aspects of *Dragon Songs*. In addition to making money for himself, his agents, and Deutsche Grammophon, Lang can also use this album to differentiate from the many other concert pianists who want to be booked by major orchestras and venues. Around the time of the release of *Dragon Songs*, Lang became the first living artist to have a Steinway piano line named after him.

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