



[Lang Lang](#)  
at [The Bridgewater Hall](#)  
Reviewed by [Charlotte Starkey](#) May 2011

One sensed that something significant was about to happen at the Bridgewater on Friday, 27th May. Urgent pressing crowds, clutching the tickets no doubt purchased many months previously, moved relentlessly towards the Bridgewater. For once I felt worried for the bemused young revellers, hoping to be legless by midnight, dodging the concert-going *aficionados* sweeping forward. The Lang Lang phenomenon had hit Manchester. He was last in Manchester ten years ago with the Hallé. On Friday he went solo.

Lang Lang, the Chinese pianist of international fame, is young, gifted, loves performance, is hugely popular and can play the piano, all attributes which both endear him to a huge following of music lovers and make him the bane of music critics. He performed the 24 Chopin *Études* at the age of thirteen in Beijing's Concert Hall and has developed, since then through commitment to the piano, to become an international, world-renowned concert pianist. He is fully engaged in all kinds of music, not only classical, and he is passionate about promoting classical music among young people.

No other pianist in recent times has developed quite the cult status and crowd-pulling power, more often associated with opera and pop stars, than this twenty seven year old Chinese

prodigy. His website sells baseball caps, tops, shoes, memory sticks and his own piano, all with the 'Lang Lang' logo. He still has the youthful appearance of a student, but with the touch of the experienced concert hall performer now. It is easy to fall for the cult, the idolisation, the mesmeric charm of the phenomenon that Lang Lang has become. It is, however, in the playing, the performance, that the test resides, rather than in the marketing and the brand.

The programme began with Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 3 in C Major, Op.2, No. 3 (1794-5). Beethoven had taken lessons with Haydn in Vienna and already had an impressive reputation as a virtuoso at the piano. He was to bring new dimensions, new structures, to the sonata form in his own compositions, a complex orchestration of shape that had a major influence on later works. The C Major is a work in four parts with a majestic opening movement, followed by the beautiful Adagio and it demands a great deal of a pianist in terms of mood and tempo of performance. This was followed by Beethoven's challenging Piano Sonata No. 23 in F minor, Op. 57, 'Appassionata'(1804-6), composed during his 'middle period', demanding great dexterity especially in the final third movement. This is a hypnotic sonata and Lang Lang captured the pace and agility required especially in the third movement. After the Interval, with a change of mood and time, Lang Lang played *Iberia* Book I (publ. 1909) by the Spanish composer Isaac Albéniz (1860 – 1909) with some beautiful melodic passages. The recital concluded with Prokofiev's profound and in sections notoriously difficult Piano Sonata No. 7 in B flat, Opus 83 (1939-42) with a very fast final section requiring great discipline from the pianist. All three composers were, of course, themselves brilliant pianists and the selection gave every expectation of a challenging repertoire, although Lang Lang has performed these works before now.



Alongside his interpretations of the individual works, there is the matter of his performance as a totality. Lang Lang has chosen, especially with Beethoven and Prokofiev, compositions set against a context of political unrest and rumblings of war in their respective periods. What distinguished him was his desire to present himself at one with these grand, complex

statements in every movement and gesture of his hands and arms. Much has been said of his 'dramatic' performance – the flourishes, the sweep of the arm, the movement of the fingers outstretched as he descends upon a note, a chord; and he has attracted what has become in its own way a kind of fashionably adverse criticism for this 'display'.

It is easy to focus only on Lang Lang's gestures; but certainly at the Bridgewater last Friday it was clear that they are really a means to a musical end – to enable him to hear what he is about to play, to focus the intensity of concentration that he obviously demands of himself as a pianist so that the alternating dominant, sombre and lyrical moods of the music can be heard. A critical dismissal of his musical talent for reasons sometimes not to do with the music or his talent, but much to do with a fascination with his physical gestures, can be as damaging to the cause of classical music as some find his own performance to be. There may well be a danger that, when a discussion about a performance of classical music becomes largely a discussion about the critic's irritation with the pianist's gestures, the musicianship itself is lost.

On Friday Lang Lang commanded the Steinway with a control which allowed the piano to sing especially in the C Major Sonata. If one listens intently - and Lang Lang can command that kind of attention – he is entirely in accord with the expectations within the music and achieves a mellow richness in the opening bars which sometimes can appear harsh if not sensitively played. He began with a finger, hand and wrist dexterity that led well into the dominant chords that follow. During the C Major Sonata it gradually became apparent that one rarely hears Beethoven played quite like this – listening to the music anew, a full orchestral richness of sound that was of a piece with the majesty of the music. Lang Lang can be subtle as well as loud (a balance not always achieved in the Prokofiev) and he tempered his performance with lyrical passages of beauty especially in passages of *Iberia*. One felt the concentration, preparation, descent of the fingers for precisely the right weight on the keys. The sudden dramatic snatches reflected the dramatic nature of some of the music; the intensity of facial expression for all to see, sometimes interpreted as flamboyance, on Friday revealed a musician focused upon the music. Lang Lang did use a 'free' hand to conduct himself on a number of occasions; but it was not affectation, even if appearing somewhat indulgent – more a testimony to his involvement with his performance and the standard for which he was striving. One saw the same commitment to the music when he played the C Major under the scrutiny of Barenboim in 2005 (available on YouTube, too), a similar striving for total involvement in the performance.

He clearly knows by now how to play the audience as well as he plays the piano, and there are ways in which comparisons with other pianists can interfere with what Lang Lang is attempting to achieve. So long as he remains in control of the music, with the marketing and demands of his public kept under strict control, and the voices of the critics kept in the distance, he can remain an inspiration for many more musicians in the future. After all he joins a long list of distinguished figures in music, literature and painting who in the past have been dismissed by contemporary pundits. There is, of course, an important distinction between performing the music and performing oneself, playing to the gallery. This has its dangers: at one point, especially when the applause broke out, I caught a glimpse of what a gladiator must have endured in a Roman amphitheatre. There is something predatory about wild applause. He displayed on Friday evening nothing of the self-indulgence for which some critics have found fault: he can perform music with the intense concentration and humility of a focused mind. If, through him, piano music expands its appeal, and others are encouraged to learn to play, then only good can come from that. It is certainly worth considering a visit to one of his concerts when next he is on the circuit. He is a very good pianist. He knows his music. He can interpret great music with sensitivity and depth. His concerts are booked months in advance; seats are not cheap; and one must keep an eye on the listings in order to be guaranteed a place.