

## **Return of the Hero: In His Native China, Pianist Yundi Li Is Welcomed Like a Rock Star**

**By Laura Santini**

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SHENZHEN, China - Yundi Li's soulful playing and good looks have made him a musical sensation. The 22-year-old is mobbed by fans and his shows sell out weeks in advance. In a TV ad, he dons Nikes to race to a concert. A Western record label signed him up, taking his first CD platinum and making a music video in which a young woman in low-cut jeans sips wine and gazes adoringly as he plays.

While Mr. Li is treated like a rock star in his native China, he is a classical pianist, known for his gripping interpretations of Chopin and Liszt.

Mr. Li, who won one of the world's most prestigious piano competitions five years ago, plays down his pop status. "I'm not thinking about this," he says. "My job is to play my music."

His success demonstrates the intensity of a boom in classical music in China. This country's emergence as an economic superpower is fueling a cultural renaissance that, in many respects, parallels America's burst of interest in the arts that coincided with economic growth in the early 20th century.

In recent years, China's rising middle class has focused on educating its kids, in part because the country's one-child policy puts attention on the family's only next-generation breadwinner. After housing, education now represents the largest expenditure for Chinese households. Education spending this year in China is expected to reach \$90 billion, or more than double the amount just three years ago, according to Eduventures.com, a Boston-based research firm.

Music-industry executives in China estimate more than 40 million Chinese children currently study piano or violin.

"It's great for China and for the music," Mr. Li says about the country's clamoring for the arts. "Before, it wasn't easy for families."

For decades, Communists stifled classical music in China, banning it entirely during the Cultural Revolution, a decade-long renunciation of Western culture and ideas which lasted until 1976. During that time, the Red Guards stormed homes, smashed instruments and burned scores. Music conservatories were shut down. Many of the country's leading musicians committed suicide or were killed; others were exiled, forced into hard labor in the countryside.

In 1976, large anti-government protests and Mao Zedong's death prompted the Communist regime to condemn the cruelty and excess of the Cultural Revolution. China's

new leaders recognized the country would have to welcome foreign technological advances and investment to satisfy its economic needs.

These days, driven by strong domestic sales, Guangzhou Pearl River Piano Co. has become the world's biggest producer of pianos. Ten percent of all music sales in China now come from classical recordings. Musicians across the country are rushing to improve standards of upstart ensembles and orchestras. The China Philharmonic in Beijing, created four years ago, garnered encouraging reviews this year from its first world tour.

All this stands in contrast to the U.S., where critics lament the loss of younger audiences for classical music and worry over the financial woes of many of the nation's orchestras. Classical music accounted for slightly less than 3 percent of U.S. sales last year, according to data from Nielsen SoundScan, which tracks music sales.

Like China today, America embraced classical music as its economy grew. Industrial progress and rising wealth in the U.S. a century ago fostered a desire for cultural sophistication. Steinway & Sons — then a new piano manufacturer based in Queens, New York — quickly surpassed European makers, becoming an emblem of America's technological know-how.

In 1958, at the height of the Cold War, a young Texan named Van Cliburn scored a victory on hostile soil by winning first prize at the International Tchaikovsky Piano Competition in Moscow. Upon his return, Mr. Cliburn received a hero's welcome: a ticker-tape parade in New York City.

Steinway says China is now its fastest-growing market. Hoping to increase sales even more, Steinway has begun outsourcing manufacturing of its lower-priced "Essex" brand pianos to Pearl River. While Steinway's production techniques allow the company to make 4,500 pianos a year, Pearl River makes 75,000 pianos from its multistory factory in southern China.

China's hot pianist, Mr. Li, was born in Chongqing, an industrial city in central China, and demonstrated an early flair for music. His father, Li Chuan, recalls that as a toddler, Yundi would spend hours belting out Chinese songs he had learned by heart. He later excelled at the accordion.

Encouraged, his parents bought him a piano when he was 6. The purchase was an enormous financial commitment. "It was like buying a house," the elder Mr. Li recalls. Drawing on the savings of their extended family, his parents plunked down 4,000 yuan, or nearly \$500, for the used instrument — 40 times Mr. Li's monthly salary as a manager of an iron and steel company.

Yundi's mother had studied classical ballet as a young girl but abandoned her efforts during the Cultural Revolution. The Li family seized on new freedoms to pursue musical education for their only child.

"Because of the Cultural Revolution, there are people in China who were left behind musically, and in the 1980s, these people invested their aspirations in their children," says Mr. Li's teacher, Dan Zhao Yi.

Mr. Dan, 65, one of China's most sought-after teachers, received his own lessons as a child second-hand. His father, a music-lover, scraped together money for a piano but could only afford lessons for his eldest son, who recited them to Mr. Dan. He eventually made it into a Beijing music school, but the Cultural Revolution sidetracked his career and he became an accompanist for government-sanctioned theater.

When the restrictions were lifted in 1976, he dedicated himself to teaching, traveling abroad for the first time in 1994, with a student competing in Germany. "I saw that there were very high-quality performers in Western societies," Mr. Dan, says. His student earned a runner-up prize, proving Mr. Dan could prepare young pianists to perform at international standards.

Mr. Dan first encountered Yundi Li at a local youth competition in Chongqing. Mr. Li, then 7 years old, took first prize. Mr. Dan was one of the judges. "I spotted some wrong notes, but it was very moving to see how absorbed he was in the music," Mr. Dan recalls.

Shortly afterward, the two started working together. In 1994, Mr. Dan was offered a teaching job in Shenzhen, more than 700 miles away. A capitalist experiment by the decree of former leader Deng Xiaoping, Shenzhen was undergoing a transformation from a fishing village to a gleaming metropolis. Mr. Dan thought he would find freedom and funding, and he accepted. Mr. Li and his parents followed him.

At the Shenzhen Arts School, Mr. Li and Mr. Dan prepared to compete against top-level students from around the world. Mr. Li racked up prizes at contests in the U.S. and Europe. Officials in the Shenzhen municipal government suggested that they try for perhaps the most elusive prize of all: The Frederick Chopin International Piano Competition.

The Chopin competition, held in Warsaw, takes place just once every five years. It has been a launching pad for some of the world's most renowned artists, including Martha Argerich and Maurizio Pollini. For 15 years, judges had refused to award any contestant the gold medal.

Mr. Li beat 93 contestants in four rounds of playing, becoming the youngest person to ever take the top honor. At the award ceremony, he heard his name announced and dashed offstage to call his parents, who had stayed awake all night in Shenzhen waiting for news. "I won!" he shouted, and hung up.

The Chopin competition win propelled his career world-wide. Classical music label Deutsche Grammophon signed him to an exclusive recording contract. The company markets him like a pop idol, creating a fan club and producing flashy videos.

Some reviewers worry the intoxicating attention paid to Mr. Li will impede his development into a mature artist. And with so many young pianists, there will be plenty of competition for the spotlight.

Deutsche Grammophon says it's busy looking for other Chinese up-and-comers. The 2005 Chopin contest began last week, with winners to be announced October 21. Dave Tam, director of the classics and jazz division at Universal Music, sees Mr. Li's success as providing a role model for an entire generation 梠 r at least inspiration for a lot of piano lessons. "Every parent wants their son or daughter to be another Yundi Li," he says.