

INTERNATIONAL  
PIANO

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## TAN DUN'S PIANO CONCERTO TO RECEIVE ITS UK PREMIERE BY LANG LANG IN APRIL

'Tan's concerto, vibrantly scored for an orchestra rich with Western and Asian percussion instruments, has the entertaining vitality and coloristic allure of his brilliant film music.' So wrote the *New York Times* of the new Piano Concerto by Tan Dun on the event of its world premiere by Lang Lang and the New York Philharmonic under Leonard Slatkin in 2008. Tan is best known for his film soundtracks, which include the Oscar-winning score for *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, and, like his compatriot Lang Lang, he tries to build bridges between East and West through music. His Piano Concerto is an example of this motivation. In April Lang Lang will give the UK premiere of the piece with the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Tan, at London's Barbican Centre. The performance is part of the Barbican's 'Beyond the Wall' festival of contemporary Chinese music, which runs from March to May.\*

### LANG LANG:

Lang Lang performing the world premiere of Tan Dun's Concerto in New York in 2008. 'It's very physical,' says the pianist, who is required to use his fingers, palms, fists and forearms to play the piece



I first met Tan at a New Year's Eve party nine years ago in New York. I performed and recorded his *Eight Memories in Watercolor* piano pieces, which are musical impressions of his home in Hunan, and we worked together on revising the score. Next I played his score for the Chinese film *The Banquet*. The piece was one of the first to present piano and percussion equally in a soundtrack, and our work on it led to our collaboration on the Piano Concerto.

In the Concerto Tan seeks to show different sides of what the piano can do with an orchestra, although it is in a traditional concerto form. It's very melodic, rhythmic and dramatic. Tan began his career as a percussionist and he feeds percussive elements and melodic parts into the piece. The Concerto is very physical for the pianist, who has to use more than just the fingers to create sounds – lots of upper body strength and movement are needed, too. There are cluster chords that I play with my fists, karate-like chops, and I use

the full weight of my forearms in the conclusion. Yet there are also equal amounts of gentle moments and melodies – there's a very large arrangement of colours.

*The Banquet* score and this resulting Concerto represent a new way to experience movie music within the classical genre. The melody is based a little on Tan's Chinese roots; it truly flows from his heart. At the same time it's connected to the international world – that's why I believe Tan is so successful as a composer. Tan and I both carry out our love of music with great energy and we're interested in finding new ways to reach and inspire new audiences, particularly the younger generation, with classical music. I think the Concerto will appeal to many people, especially the young. The premiere in New York was very exciting and was appreciated by the audience. I thought the critics were supportive as well. We have yet to record the work, but I look forward to working with Tan on many more projects in the future.



Lang Lang (left) and Tan Dun (right) after the world premiere of Dun's Piano Concerto. 'The piece fires up the audience,' says the composer

## TAN DUN:

*Eight Memories in Watercolor* was my 'opus 1'. I wrote it in 1978 as a first-year student at the Beijing Conservatory, four years before Lang Lang was born! So we decided to work together on a new piece, and talked about this Piano Concerto for two to three years. Lang Lang loves martial arts because of the training principles, and I love it because of the philosophy, so we had the idea of focusing on martial arts. Lang Lang is like my little brother, and when we talk he is very frank. He asked me to write something directly from the heart, using martial arts philosophy to organise those feelings. We proposed the Concerto to the New York Philharmonic, and fortunately they loved it.

I worked on applying the principles of martial arts, including speed and touch, to piano technique. In the Concerto you hear fluttering notes produced by the five fingers touching one key, and plucking sounds like those of an Indian sitar, 'hip-hop' banging sounds like thunder which involve the palms and fists, and 'rock'n'roll power', with the pianist using their two forearms. Lang Lang was unsure about the 'banging' at first; he was worried that these methods weren't graceful or 'classical' enough. But we experimented with the fingers, fists, palms and forearms, and at the end of our rehearsals he said, 'We have to do this.' Now he does it all naturally and confidently. He's a wonderful kung fu master – physically and spiritually.

I also concentrated on the simplicity and sparseness of the notes when conceiving the piece – and therein lies much of the work's complexity. It's like Chinese calligraphy and

painting: there are many layers of blackness in just one brushstroke. The piano textures are like the ink, and much depends on how thick the stroke is, how fast you paint, and how much ink is used. I also focused on the balance between yin and yang – that's the Chinese way. To me everything comes in pairs: man and woman, the sun and moon, and in this Concerto, fire and water. I explored powerful and soft dynamics, 'attacking' sounds and their echoes, single notes with complicated touches, and different tempos. In the first movement there are all kinds of drumming, which are related to fire. The second movement uses the water gong to echo the piano, and beautiful 'watery' strings. It's loving, sensitive and has a sense of longing. In the third movement there is a dialogue between water and fire, and all sorts of percussive instruments such as the marimba, xylophone and vibraphone, have a discourse with the piano. There's a lot of counterpoint and contrast between the soloist and orchestra: Lang Lang is playing much of the time, but the orchestral part is also very detailed and independent. It's not like a Chopin piano concerto, where the piano provides most of the sound and colour, stating all the main ideas, with the orchestra providing support.

Bartók is my hero, and this Concerto is a tribute to him. He was so creative in turning folk songs and instruments into something contemporary, alive and colourful. He was able to develop folk music into classical, and something earthly to heavenly. His passion and mind fit so naturally with my life and my music. I grew up in rural China and had a long

struggle there, but Bartók's music encouraged me to bring the sounds of my village and my indigenous memories to a classical stage, to mainstream institutions and to international life. His piano writing was so percussive and powerful, intelligent and intellectual, and there are many percussive elements in my Concerto too. I don't directly quote folk material, nor have I followed any typical 20th-century Western compositional method, such as atonalism or Serialism.

Film music balances the needs between sound and picture, and is very story-driven. A piano concerto, symphony or chamber work is purely a sound piece, and therefore requires something much more abstract, with many more layers. This Concerto also contains more contrasts than my other piano pieces – melodically, harmonically and in terms of dynamics and tempos. It's a very difficult piece to play.

You may wonder why I've created something extremely new, which is based on something quite old, philosophically. But everything, including life, is a circle. I've never believed that contemporary music should abandon tradition, but rather should review and rethink it. Every time this piece has been performed the audience is fired up, stands immediately and shouts. It's wonderful that Lang Lang's and my own indigenous spirits can be shared by all kinds of people – truly the East meeting West.

**INTERVIEWS BY CECILIA LEUNG**

*Tan Dun's Piano Concerto will receive its UK premiere on 21 April at the Barbican, London*