Second Reaction: The Man Behind the Piano


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Lang Lang, the most famous pianist in China, has played with some of the world's most famous orchestras. Lang Lang: Playing with Flying Keys is a biography about his road from poverty to fame.

The first time I heard of Lang Lang was when I watched the 2008 Beijing Olympic opening ceremonies. Honestly, I did not know how famous he was, but anyone who was watching the program would have seen that he was a wonderful pianist. His style was extremely elegant, and the music made me feel at peace. By reading this book, I learned a lot about him.

This thin, easily read biography seems to be at a fourth through sixth grade reading level, but the information presented was definitely appropriate for a high school student. A teen picking up this book for the first time might think it was another boring autobiography about a child prodigy. However, this is not a book to judge by its cover or genre. I followed Lang Lang's footsteps through his childhood, teenage years, and adulthood, feeling all of his emotions as I read. I realized that he was not that perfect person depicted on the cover. He was someone real like you and I.

I enjoyed this book because Lang Lang and I share the same Chinese heritage, and we both love music. If the reader could not relate with Lang Lang in any other way, he or she might not like it that much. The reader might sympathize with Lang Lang's childhood, instead of empathizing with his personal determination to succeed.

When Lang Lang talked about Tom and Jerry and Monkey King, I was excited. I have watched Tom and Jerry, too, and when Lang Lang said Tom and Jerry inspired his playing, I was intrigued. As to Lang Lang's discussions of Monkey King, I thought also it was very cute when he told how he imagined his hero sitting beside him and giving him courage to play in front of new people. It was very interesting how these stories inspired his creativity and strong passion for the piano.

I love music, particularly playing the violin and singing. I used to play the piano as a child, but I no longer play, unfortunately. Therefore, I truly admire Lang Lang for not forsaking his passion, even when his strict father forced him to play when he would rather not.

There were parts of the book that made me uncomfortable, but they were necessary to show Lang Lang's growth. For example, his family lived in poverty, and he had an
abusive father. Lang Lang was naturally talented, but his father forced him to play long hours. Schoolwork became secondary, and this is something I do not agree with, because school is my first priority. Also, his father took Lang Lang away from his mother so she would not interfere with his piano future. The biggest shock came when I read that his father tried to make Lang Lang end his life by swallowing a large number of pills just because he lost his chance of going to the conservatory. It hurt me to know that there are some parents who are so obsessed with success that they would mistreat their children. Throughout Lang Lang’s story, I felt contempt for his father.

At age fifteen, Lang Lang moved to the United States and began to change his life. He experienced living in a different culture, and he became a successful pianist who had developed a new dream.

About the Author

Tracey Jen is currently a junior at West Lafayette Junior/Senior High School. She plays the violin in the school orchestra. She also loves singing and painting.