

# Clavier Companion

March/April 2013

An interview with

Dennis  
Alexander



# Clavier Companion

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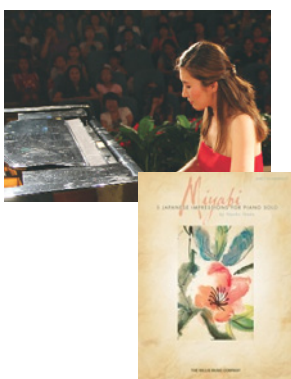


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*On the Cover: Dennis Alexander in  
his Albuquerque studio with Shelby.  
Photo by Vickie Fellows, Blue Sky Images.*



## Putting It All Together: Repertoire & Performance

Nancy Bachus, Editor

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John Holliger

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Photo of Gulimina Mahamuti by John Holliger, 2013. Used with permission.

### The Chinese phenomenon in the piano world

During the past twenty or so years, most professional pianists and piano teachers have noticed the influx of Asian pianists. They appear at piano recitals and competitions locally and internationally, often comprising the majority of the performers. The names of Yundi Li, Yuja Wang, and certainly Lang Lang are better known today than most past giants in our field. Although American-born, over half of the students in my own private studio are of Asian descent, with most being Chinese.

When piano teachers get together, they often discuss why and how this phenomenon has occurred. I have thought of the irony of Asian pianists in the forefront of keeping vibrant and alive the Western tradition of piano playing. The "Tiger-Mom" phenomenon, insisting that Chinese moth-

ers are better at raising their children than Western ones, has only increased interest in knowing more about Chinese culture and the training of their children.

This year I have had the pleasure of meeting, and getting to know, Gulimina Mahamuti, a pianist born and trained in China who earned advanced degrees, and now teaches, here in the United States. She is the first Uyghur from the province of Xinjiang, in Western China, to receive the D.M.A. degree in Piano Performance in this country. Having studied and taught for many years in both China and the United States, she is eminently qualified to compare the two systems of music study and training, and to shed light on this new trend in our profession. I find her observations and insights fascinating, and feel certain readers will agree. ▲

### Piano study in twenty-first century China by Gulimina Mahamuti

Deemed the ultimate symbol of Western bourgeoisie and smashed to pieces by the Red Guards of the Cultural Revolution, the piano was on the verge of extinction in China in the 1960s. Middle-class Chinese families, anxious to remove the so-called "evidence of musical counterrevolution" from their homes, disposed of the political liabilities by selling their pianos as second-hand furniture.<sup>1</sup> Yet today, barely forty years later, China is the world's largest piano producer, Chinese piano education is blooming, and Chinese pianists share the international spotlight. This dramatic reversal in our time has deep roots—political, cultural, and economic—that have resulted in thirty million Chinese piano students competing for the 200,000 places annually in top conservatories.<sup>2</sup> With China's new prominence on the world's stage of music and piano perform-



*Yili Normal University, College of Arts. Half of the audience is young children, most younger than age ten.*

ance, it is important to understand these roots.

First, with a rising economy and living standard, Chinese parents can now afford for their children what they could not dream of for themselves two or three decades ago: the opportunity to learn,

appreciate, and understand music, and to be able to play an instrument. The piano is the right instrument since, in China, it is the *Yueqi Zhi Wang*, or the “King of Instruments,” with its over three-hundred years of history, and requirement of methodical training and sophisticated playing styles for mastery.

Secondly, the one-child policy introduced in 1978 for population control had an unintended consequence: Chinese parents spend much more time and effort than those in previous generations to find the best opportunities for their only child. Parents who can afford an instrument and the necessary lessons for their child make the piano their first choice. Furthermore, the so-called “Lang Lang Effect” dominates the wishes of many parents and children, not unlike the dream of becoming a successful basketball player in certain segments of the American population. To achieve this end, some Chinese parents go to the extreme of giving up their homes, jobs, and personal lives, and they use their entire savings to accompany their child, often teenage or younger, to cities far from their hometowns for piano study. The piano, like its basketball counterpart, is seen as a path to a successful life.

Thirdly, China is a nation of over 1.3 billion people, and competition, by necessity, penetrates almost all aspects of Chinese society. As a result, many parents devote all their efforts to provide their children with the best possible competitive edge. Kahn and Wakin reported that, “[Chinese] Children are being pushed to study an instrument, both as a possible means of advancement in the country’s hypercompetitive school system and as a way of creating respectable, well-rounded adults.”<sup>3</sup>

The piano has justifiably become an influential part of Chinese children’s heavy extra-curricular activities in the hypercompetitive admission process of Chinese schools, beginning with middle school and continuing through high school and college. A student who passes the highest national piano exams and who earns performance certificates and competition prizes will have a better chance of being admitted to good schools than those who do not play the piano. These piano-related activities not only validate a student’s performance ability, but also corroborate that student’s academic excellence and will play a key role in the admission process into middle or high school. It is also well known that a liberal arts university with an orchestra usually looks for students who excel both academically and musically, and will lower the required admission score twenty to thirty points (a significant reduction) to attract them. This is similar to some American schools’ admission decisions to attract football players.

Finally, for Chinese students, the cultural belief of “no pain, no gain” means that one has to work hard to achieve success in life, even if it means enduring an excruciating process first. Chinese parents consider the arduous process of learning to play the piano as the best way to imbue good habits and to cultivate delayed gratification in their children.

These four factors result in an unprecedented demand for pianos and piano



*In Urumuqi, the capital of Xinjiang, Gulimina performed to a full house, standing room only. Xinjiang Autonomous Region is approximately two and one-half times the size of France.*

instruction, in opportunities for lucrative piano-related businesses, and in a special relationship among teachers, students, and parents that is not commonly seen outside China.

Today, piano production is exploding and the piano is one of the hottest selling items in China. Two decades ago, there were five main piano manufacturers located in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Yinkou, and Ningbo. Between 1981 and 1983, they produced thirteen to eighteen thousand pianos per year.<sup>4</sup> By 2006, however, the number of piano factories had grown to 142, producing 370,000 pianos and dominating world production.<sup>5</sup> The manufacturers are constantly

concerned about production speed to meet demand now that many families can afford pianos. As a result, the number of piano students has also dramatically increased, creating a huge demand for piano education and for private piano teachers.

Private piano teachers are mainly conservatory/collegiate piano professors, conservatory/college piano majors, kindergarten music teachers, and piano teachers who only teach at home. Since China universities do not award the doctorate of musical arts in piano performance, many domestically trained private piano teachers have either college or master’s degrees in piano performance or a degree in music education with a piano emphasis, equivalent to a B.M. or M.M. degree in the United States.

Teaching standards vary considerably nationwide. In metropolitan areas, for example, where music-related activities thrive, one can find better-trained piano teachers, whereas in smaller cities with fewer cultural activities, piano teachers are less plentiful. In rural China it is not possible, by and large, to learn to play the piano.

The concept of private piano studios in China is very vague, because most piano teachers do not treat their private teaching as a business entity (with tax and zoning considerations, for example). Neither do they develop thoughtfully or legally written studio policies as many private piano teachers do in the U.S. Verbal agreement, mutual respect, and trust between parents and teachers are considered more essential.

In large cities, such as Beijing or Shanghai with populations over twenty million, a teacher could easily have twenty to fifty private piano students. As a rule, a teacher with a higher professional title can charge higher fees and thus can teach fewer students, usually no more than ten. Their students are often prospective college piano majors. In smaller cities with populations less than ten million, a teacher usually has fifteen to thirty students. Unlike the U.S., where the length of a piano lesson depends on the student’s age, ability, and level, most teachers in China offer standard weekly one-hour lessons. Half-hour lessons are rare, but forty-five-minute lessons are sometimes offered to young beginners. Many university professors offer only forty-five-minute lessons, but require two lessons back-to-back each week.

Private piano teaching has become highly lucrative in China, as has the piano examination process. It is common to see children start piano lessons at age three or four since



*These piano-major students, age thirteen to seventeen, are from middle and high schools affiliated with China Conservatory of Music in Beijing. Their repertoire already includes works such as Liszt’s Tarantella, and Venezia Napoli; Granados’s Allegro de concierto, op. 46; Ravel’s La Valse for piano solo; and Scriabin’s Piano Sonata No. 4 in F-sharp Major, Op. 30.*

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parents strongly believe that children who begin piano study at an early age will have a better future. Most piano teachers bill lesson fees monthly; a one-time payment of piano tuition for a semester is rare. Since checks and credit cards are uncommon in China, lesson fees are almost always paid in cash.

To put lesson fees in perspective, keep in mind that the 2011 gross per capita income in China was 31,616 Yuan.<sup>6</sup> In cities such as Beijing or Shanghai, a piano lesson fee ranges from as low as 80 to as high as 1000 Yuan, depending on the teacher's educational background and academic/professional title. For a forty-five-minute lesson for young beginners, a kindergarten teacher or private teacher teaching at home usually charges between 80 and 160 Yuan. College piano majors charge between 100 and 300 Yuan per lesson. Collegiate piano teachers, regardless of titles, could charge from 400 to 500 Yuan for a one-hour lesson. A teacher who serves on an undergraduate admission committee or who is a graduate advisor in piano performance could easily charge 800 to 1000 Yuan for a forty-five-minute lesson; as mentioned previously, prospective piano students are required to take two forty-five-minute lessons back-to-back each week. In smaller municipalities, piano lesson fees tend to be less expensive, ranging from 60 to 200 Yuan for a forty-five-minute or one-hour lesson, again depending on the teacher's educational background and professional title.

In China, unlike the U.S., many children at elementary levels, and those between the ages of three to nine, have an additional teacher, the so-called "supervising practice teacher" or "tutoring teacher," whose principal duty is to supervise a student's practice at home. These tutoring teachers come to supervise students at least twice a week, sometimes daily if necessary. In some cases, the tutoring teachers also attend their students' regular lessons and take notes from the piano teacher. The fee a tutoring teacher charges varies but is usually one-third to half of the regular lesson fee in that geographic area.

Along with the lucrative piano teaching profession is the equally lucrative piano examination process. In the past twenty years, more and more exams are offered by different organizations in China, and they are increasingly administered nationwide. These exams are viewed as the most important tools for evaluating private piano teaching results and students' achievements. Each year, millions of piano students register to take these exams. Because there are so many different ones,

the organizations that devise them also publish and sell their own preparation materials. The most authoritative of the Extra Curriculum Piano Examinations come from the Central, the China, and the Shanghai Conservatories of Music; the Chinese Musicians Association; and in recent years, the Royal Conservatory of Music. While these exams have enhanced private piano teaching standards, concerns have been raised that they also shift the nature of private piano teaching from music-making into an exam-passing business, with teachers paying more attention to technique and repertoire development than fundamental musicianship.

Finally, the rising living standard, the one-child policy, the competition among 1.3 billion people, and the cultural belief in hard work have fostered an unusual relationship among teachers, students, and parents. Teachers must push their students sternly in order to be viewed by parents as good teachers, and piano teachers see their students' technical development as one of the more important facets of successful teaching. Because of that, technical exercises are a vital part of a piano lesson. To develop students' technique, most teachers use Charles-Louis Hanon's *The Virtuoso Pianist in 60 Exercises*, Ferdinand Beyer's *Elementary Instruction Book for the Piano*, Op. 101, and Carl Czerny's Op. 599, Op. 849, Op. 299, and Op. 740 in a progressive sequence for students from beginning, intermediate, early advanced, to advanced levels. For advanced students, some teachers also assign Moritz Moszkowski's fifteen *Études de Virtuosité*, Op. 72.

Most teachers require students to learn and play all of the above exercises, especially from Hanon, Beyer, and Czerny (Op. 599, Op. 849, and most etudes from Op. 299 and Op. 740). Each week, a teacher assigns a student three to five short etudes,

such as those from Beyer or Czerny's Op. 599, and expects the student to master all of them by the following week's lesson. Because of the extensive emphasis on piano technique, students develop strong technical skills at a young age, aided by their teachers' repeated and meticulous instruction concerning hand shaping.

For beginners, as late as a decade ago, domestic (Chinese) method series were virtually non-existent, and teachers' choices were limited primarily to *John Thompson's Easiest Piano Course* or *Modern Course for the Piano* or, more recently, to *Bastien Piano Basics*. Many piano teachers are still unfamiliar with other good method series and repertoire books from the U.S.; even Nancy Bachus's "Spirit" series, which has been translated into Chinese and published by Shanghai Music Publishing House for several years now, is available only in larger cities. For repertoire materials, most Chinese teachers use only examination-related materials for obvious reasons, and few selections are available from different genres, such as sacred, holiday, and ensemble music, or pop and jazz.

To ensure steady progress, teachers expect parents to take responsibility for their children's practice. Many parents, especially those with younger children, are required to be actively involved by attending their children's weekly piano lessons and by supervising their practice sessions at home. One hour of practice a day is considered normal for a child at an elementary level, with two to three hours a day for those at intermediate or advanced levels. Children are expected to listen to both parents and teachers, and to accept harsh criticisms sometimes in order to improve.

Comparing similarities and differences between China and the U.S., many are too obvious to state, but some are noteworthy. Even when music study and piano playing

are considered to be fun, educational, and an elective here, one still hears of students who never touch the piano again once the years of lessons are over. In China, if students stop playing, they do so after passing the top-level piano exams. In both countries, one finds good and dedicated teachers instilling a love for music and the piano in their students that is meant to last a lifetime.

The explosive transformation of the role of the piano and piano education in China over the past few decades is a natural consequence of economic, political, and cultural forces that are still in effect today. It is gradually becoming clear that the exponential growth of the piano and piano education in China is not sustainable for at least two reasons. First, the pool of available students, however large, is still exhaustible because it is not as quickly replenished given the one-child policy. Secondly, the demand for musicians (and the consequent justification for teaching positions in academia and private studios) is not unlimited and therefore, saturable. Yet, it is equally clear that understanding the causes of the non-sustainability offers few viable alternatives to the inevitable collapse of demand—similar to the recent housing market in the U.S.—since addressing those deep roots are not economically, politically, or culturally popular. Just as in the U.S., what we musicians do as a profession is, after all, a reflection of what society values. ▲

<sup>1</sup>Kraus, Richard Curt. (1989). *Pianos and Politics in China: Middle-Class Ambitions and the Struggle over Western Music*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 140.

<sup>2</sup>Kahn, Joseph & Wakin, Daniel J. (2007, April 3).

Classical Music Looks Toward China With Hope. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com>

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Kraus, p. 183.

<sup>5</sup>Kahn, Joseph & Wakin, Daniel J. (2007, April 3).

Classical Music Looks Toward China With Hope. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com>

<sup>6</sup>As of December, 2012 one U.S. dollar equaled 6.2354 Chinese Yuan. Retrieved from <http://www.google.com/finance?q=USDCNY>

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