

Cool and Collected

NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC PRINCIPAL OBOE LIANG WANG ('03)
PLAYS WITH EXQUISITE CONTROL AND NERVES OF STEEL.

BY ANNE O'DONNELL



Liang Wang PHOTO: CHRIS LEE

“Liang has great understanding and respect for what his colleagues are doing. He fits in seamlessly, but he can also shine and step forward in a very natural way.”

— Alan Gilbert

Liang Wang shines under pressure. He always has. It’s hard to think of a more valuable trait for an oboist—aside from musical talent, of course. So it was a beautiful confluence of events when, hearing his uncle play the famous oboe solo in *Swan Lake*, the seven-year-old Liang perked up. “That’s my voice,” he recalls thinking. “That’s the sound I want to make.” And so he did. Now 31, Mr. Wang begins his fifth year as principal oboe of the New York Philharmonic this fall.

He worked hard to get there. Mr. Wang left his home city of Qing Dao (Tsingtao) at thirteen to study at Beijing Central Conservatory. Two years later he was a high-school student in California, studying at Idyllwild Arts Academy. Around this time he spent two summers in Aspen studying with John de Lancie, Curtis’s director from 1977 to 1985 and a graduate of the school, who had joined the Curtis faculty when he became the Philadelphia Orchestra’s principal oboe in 1954. In those lessons the young oboist first encountered the renowned Curtis legacy in his instrument. “I was basically a hot shot from high school and I thought I knew everything. Mr. de Lancie made me understand that there’s a tremendous amount of humility that goes into making music. It’s not only just about the flashiness or technique.”

What he learned from Mr. de Lancie was reinforced and deepened when Mr. Wang enrolled in Curtis at age nineteen to study with Richard Woodhams, whom Mr. Wang calls “the biggest influence and example for me.” The oboe studio at Curtis has been led by only three oboe teachers in its 87-year history. Marcel Tabuteau taught oboe and woodwind ensemble for the first 30 years, John de Lancie for the next 30, and Mr. Woodhams (also a Curtis alumnus) has led the studio ever since. “Just sit down and understand the music,” is Mr. Wang’s summary of the mindset he encountered at Curtis. “That’s the first thing Mr. Woodhams taught me. Rather than, ‘how many competitions have you won?’”

His peers were quickly aware of the results. “Liang took his role as a leader in the wind section very seriously. He was very exacting and hard-working,” says flutist Andrea Kaplan, associate principal of the St. Louis Symphony and Liang’s Curtis classmate ten years ago. “He had very concrete and convincing ideas of how the music should go.” The two played together in orchestra and wind class for years; among many happy musical memories, Ms. Kaplan vividly recalls their performance in Poulenc’s Sextet for Winds and Piano.

A RAPID RISE

Mr. Wang graduated at a lucky time for an oboist. In 2003 the number of major orchestral oboe openings was uncommonly high—Cleveland, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, to name a few—and he was auditioning constantly. “I always made it to the finals, but then it was so frustrating that I wasn’t able to get the job. But I kept trying.” Mr. Wang credits his parents for teaching him a positive attitude and perseverance: “I didn’t think anything weird or negative.” In two years, he prevailed in the auditions for eight positions, some of which he left after a short stay—or had no time to accept at all—because he won something else. He played a season each at the San Francisco Ballet and the Cincinnati Symphony and a summer at the Santa Fe Opera. Eventually he faced a rare choice between principal positions at both the New York Philharmonic and the Metropolitan Opera. He opted for the Philharmonic out of admiration for its music director at the time, Lorin Maazel.

Mr. Wang’s seven-year-old self was right: he loves his job. “As is the case with all woodwind principals in great orchestras, he has a real sense of personality and a real voice that



Liang Wang returns to Curtis with pianist Benjamin Hochman ('01) on October 9 to perform on the Alumni Recital Series.

Liang Wang plays with his New York Philharmonic colleagues at the Leipzig Gewandhaus in May 2011.
PHOTO: CHRIS LEE

he brings to his music making,” says the New York Philharmonic’s current music director, Curtis alumnus Alan Gilbert. “Liang has great understanding and respect for what his colleagues are doing. He fits in seamlessly, but he can also shine and step forward in a very natural way when he needs to.” Making music at the highest level, Mr. Wang notes, is “like being a great cook. You make the little accent in different places, little flavors that come through. The surprise and the little delicate treats of different things are most memorable to people.”

The culinary metaphor is characteristic, and hints at another passion. Mr. Wang loves to explore the flavors of New York, whether it’s hunting down the best smoked fish, caviar, and bagels in Brighton Beach or sampling shots of tequila in Chelsea. And he relishes making a meal for friends. “I’ve heard his playing more than I’ve sampled his cooking, but I was astonished by his gifts at the wok,” says piano faculty member Gary Graffman, who was the president of Curtis when the oboist was in school. “In my presence he made a most elaborate and delicious dinner for six as casually as if he were handing around peanuts. If he ever gets bored with the oboe, another brilliant career awaits.” Mr. Wang also teaches oboe in the college and precollege programs at Manhattan School of Music and at New York University; and is honorary professor at the Beijing Central Conservatory.

As at Curtis, he still takes his principal oboe role very seriously. Alan Gilbert describes a classic moment. The New York Philharmonic was on tour in Europe performing Beethoven’s Symphony No. 3 (“Eroica”) with its famous oboe solo. “We were at the temple of music, the Musikverein in Vienna,” says Alan. “Liang is a very cool customer and he has nerves of steel. Before the concert you could see in his eye a special thrill—he really wanted to conquer Vienna.”

The pressure was on. And so was Liang Wang. ♦

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