



Lang Lang: Latitude's classical headliner

## UK

### Lang Lang

Latitude Festival, Suffolk 15 July

Multi-arts event Latitude Festival, now in its seventh year, is beloved for its eclectic programming and beautiful setting: woodland art galleries nudge a helter-skelter, and oversize books form the pathway to a poetry tent. While rock and pop music plays out from pulsating stages, bookworms can escape to the literary arena, and those in search of a giggle pile into the comedy tent. Past years have seen dalliances with classical music – London Contemporary Orchestra, Britten Sinfonia and locals Faster Than Sound have made several appearances – but this instalment included the first classical headliner: Lang Lang (who else?).

Arriving by gondola to the Waterfront Stage, the 30-year-old pianist instantly charmed the lakeside throng of around 7,000 (some estimates go as high as 10,000). The crowd covered both banks and spilled into the woods and onto the bridge. Surrounded by large fake waterlilies and a handful of punters in straw hats, Lang Lang climbed aboard the floating structure and gave revellers a series of regal waves. He performed a collection of short pieces, predominantly by Chopin and Liszt, and chatted amiably to the audience throughout. Despite

some creative rubato, *Liebstraum* No 3 was particularly magical in this setting, with the sun peering upon rapt faces. One Chinese piece was also featured, the appropriately titled *On the Calm Lake*, followed by Chopin's *Waltz in A-flat* Op 69 No 1, *Etude* Op 10 No 5 and *Etude* Op 25 No 11. The choice of *Winter Wind* was also apt; Lang Lang managed to remove his scarf, but understandably plumped to keep the on-stage heater.

Pianos do not lend themselves to *al fresco* performance. Lang Lang's entourage could be observed several hours before the midday recital tinkering and tidying to ensure that every note was accurate. Hearing Chopin amplified is not a common occurrence, but was absolutely necessary given the outside location. The elements conspired against the pianist, but bar a few growls from the lower register, the sound engineering was slick, and perhaps the best witnessed on this difficult, open-air stage. Liszt's *Romance* and *La Campanella* – one of Lang Lang's big show pieces – concluded the concert, and the pianist was greeted with a standing ovation.

Purists, sharpen your pencils and fire up your emails for the letters page, for the following sentence may offend. This was one of the best piano performances I have seen this year. Not for its interpretive qualities, or unusual programming – good gracious, no! – but for what it stood for. Many people were

there specifically to see Lang Lang, but hundreds were probably not intending to see a piano recital that day. They may have been at the festival for a stand-up comic, or a reading, and stumbled across the packed waterfront stage. A large number were undoubtedly moved by what they experienced – and may now, encouraged by learning that classical piano music isn't stuffy or exclusive or the preserve of rich people in posh concert halls, feel inspired to download some different repertoire or see a pianist in their local hall. The success of the gig will encourage Latitude's artistic directors to continue to include classical music in their programming, and thus perpetuate audience growth. This is something wonderful, something to hold on to.

CLAIRE JACKSON

### Valentina Lisitsa

Royal Albert Hall, London 19 June

Rarely does a recital excite so much attention even before the artist arrives. But when a pianist chooses nothing less than the 6,000-seat Royal Albert Hall for her London debut, when the two-hour concert will be beamed live to a global audience courtesy of Google and YouTube, and when Decca works through the night just so 43 million fans won't be kept waiting for the recital CD, it commands one's attention.

And command attention Valentina Lisitsa certainly does. The sheer force of her personality plays a part, but it is her towering technique, her cultivated tone, and most of all her ability to communicate that count. There is intellectual rigour aplenty, yet this is also music direct from her heart to yours, pushing the boundaries of passion, though never to excess – an experience far removed from the colourless, safe debut recitals too common today.

Beginning with Liszt's *Rhapsody* No 12 and ending with his *Totentanz*, this was a display of serious musicianship coupled with exquisite tone control. In between, we were treated to a reserved but deeply expressive Mozart *Fantasy* in C minor, a translucent *Moonlight* recalling Wilhelm Kempff's 1966 Deutsche Grammophon recording, and some superlative Rachmaninov and Scriabin with layers of colour to die for. All this delivered as pure music, and with a welcome lack of distracting mannerisms.

GIL JETLEY

