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Lang Lang, Injured, Gets a New Left Hand. And Chick Corea



Maxim Lando (two hands on left) and Lang Lang (right) rehearsing in New York. Mr. Lando is filling in half of the keyboard for Carnegie Hall's opening-night gala as Mr. Lang recovers from a left-arm injury.

Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

By Michael Cooper

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Carnegie Hall had a problem.

Lang Lang, one of the world's most popular pianists, was scheduled to headline its opening-night gala on Wednesday. But he has been out of commission for several months with a classical musician's worst nightmare: an injury that has left him unable to use his left arm.



Mr. Lang and Mr. Lando, an alumnus of the Lang Lang International Music Foundation's Young Scholars Program. Vincent Tullio for The New York Times

Mr. Lang and Carnegie have come up with a most unusual solution to make sure the show goes on: Mr. Lang's 14-year-old protégé, Maxim Lando, will sit beside him at the piano and serve as his left hand as they play a rare two-piano version of Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" with another star, the jazz pianist Chick Corea.

It will be a first for Mr. Lang, who said in an interview that he had performed works for one hand, two hands, four hands and even six hands.



Mr. Lando and Mr. Lang, standing, with the jazz pianist Chick Corea, who is joining them for a rarely performed two-piano (and, in this case, five-hand) version of Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue." Vincent Tullio for The New York Times

“But,” he said, “never five hands.”

At a rehearsal on Friday afternoon in Manhattan, Mr. Lang’s right hand flew dexterously up and down the keyboard, while his injured left sometimes conducted; sometimes turned pages of the score; sometimes beat time on his thigh; and sometimes rested on Mr. Lando’s shoulder. Together, they traded syncopated riffs with Mr. Corea, who sat at his own piano facing them.

Mr. Corea gave Mr. Lang some suggestions on tempo (“It helps it swing a bit more”) while Mr. Lang taught Mr. Corea how to pronounce the name of the conductor Yannick Nézet-Séguin, who would be leading them and the Philadelphia Orchestra (“It’s ya-NEEK”).



Mr. Lang said he injured his arm earlier this year practicing Ravel's left-hand concerto. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

Mr. Lang, 35, one of the few classical artists to successfully break through to a broader audience, first announced in April that he would have to cancel performances because of inflammation in his left arm. He said in an interview that he had injured the arm earlier this year during what he called “a stupid practice of Ravel’s left-hand concerto,” referring to the concerto Maurice Ravel wrote in 1929 and ’30 for Paul Wittgenstein, who lost his right arm during World War I.

“I was not paying so much attention, I was already tiring, and I pushed to practice,” Mr. Lang said. He explained that several orchestras had invited him to play the piece, and he was facing a deadline to decide, so he pressed himself to learn too quickly an unfamiliar work designed for only one arm.



Mr. Lang and Mr. Lando trading syncopated riffs with Mr. Corea, who sat at his own piano facing them. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

But Mr. Lang said that he was healing well and had begun returning to his normal routine. “I’m already starting to practice, every day, a very short time now — like 20 to 30 minutes a day,” he said. “So gradually it’s recovering, coming back. But I want to be back with a totally, complete recovery — I don’t want to play halfway and stop. So I’m taking it in a safe way.”

Mr. Lang and Mr. Lando, an alumnus of the Lang Lang International Music Foundation’s Young Scholars Program, which was founded in 2008, have already played concerts together with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra and the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra. When they finished, Mr. Corea invited Mr. Lang to hear him that night at the Blue Note, the jazz club in Greenwich Village.

“I would invite Maxim,” he said, “but I don’t know what your mother would think.”

Then Mr. Lang had a question for Mr. Corea about the more improvisational world of jazz. “When you play something again,” he said, “do you play it almost similar, or completely different?”

“Both,” Mr. Corea said.

Mr. Lang asked whether he always remembered what he played.

“Only the mistakes,” Mr. Corea said.