Hearing History

A classical composer taking in “how wide this world is”

by LARA PELLEGRINELLI

Lei Liang’s Xiaoxiang, a finalist for the 2015 Pulitzer Prize, is not the virtuosic tour de force one might expect of a saxophone concerto, a form showcasing technical skill. Liang’s starring instrument trembles, croons, and cries, traversing the unsettling musical landscapes. Expressions of grief come in waves and paroxysms that overwhelm the senses. The composition was named for a region in China’s Hunan Province and inspired by the story of a villager whose husband was killed by a local Communist official during the Cultural Revolution. With no means to seek justice, she wailed like a ghost in the forest behind his residence every evening—until they both went insane.

“This woman was wailing because words didn’t mean anything anymore,” explains Liang, JF ’01, Ph.D. ’06. “I wanted to find a way to give silenced voices like hers another chance.” Xiaoxiang typifies his concerns with the politics of history—forgotten visions of the past, and those erased by the state—in his native China. He traces much of his own professional and creative course to

Lei Liang

Off the Shelf
Recent books with Harvard connections

The Rise and Fall of American Growth, by Robert J. Gordon ’62 (Princeton, $39.95). In a huge study of the U.S. standard of living since the Civil War, the Northwestern University economist, a leading scholar of productivity and growth, emerges with a very sobering message. A critic of “techno-optimists,” he sees headwinds that make impossible any return to the halcyon growth of the mid twentieth century, and focuses attention on the need to address inequality and enhance preschool education.

On the health front: Before and After Cancer Treatment, second edition, by Julie K. Silver, associate professor of physical medicine and rehabilitation (Johns Hopkins, $18.95 paper), offers eminently practical advice— informed by the author’s own experience with the disease. Palliative Care, by Harold Y. Vanderpool, B.D. ’63, Ph.D. ’71, Th.M. ’76 (McFarland, $45 paper), puts the recent emergence of palliative care as a medical specialty (see “An Extra Layer of Care,” March-April 2015, page 33) into the context of the four-century search for “a good death.” Climbing Back, by Elise Rosenhaupt ’68 (Peninsula Road Press, $15 paper), is the highly personal account of a son’s traumatic brain injury and recovery.

Reclaiming Conversation, by Sherry Turkle ’69, Ph.D. ’76 (Penguin, $27.95). In her most searching exploration of the human relationship with technology, the MIT professor (an Incorporator of this magazine) probes the consequences of assuming that connectivity is the same thing as conversation, “the most human—and humanizing—thing we do.” It says something disturbing about the times that she has to make a case for “the power of talk in a digital age” (the subtitle), but she does so compellingly.

Family values: In Reconciling Infertility (Princeton, $35), Candida R. Moss and Joel S. Baden, Ph.D. ’07, theology scholars at Notre Dame and Yale, explore what it meant to be “barren”—in a world where humans were commanded to “Be fruitful and multiply”—through the stories of Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel, and beyond. Then Comes Marriage, by Roberta Kaplan ’88 with Lisa Dickey (Norton, $27.95), narrates Kaplan’s role as the Paul, Weiss litigator representing Edie Windsor in the United States v. Windsor challenge to the Defense of Marriage Act—and her much earlier connection to Thea Spyer, Windsor’s deceased spouse, who had counseled Kaplan when she was coming to terms with her own sexuality.

The War on Alcohol, by Lisa McGirr, professor of history (Norton, $27.95). The author’s research and writing about Prohibition, described in these pages in 2001, took about as long as her subject. In a fresh interpretation, she sees a white, Protestant, middle-class campaign to reinforce a challenged culture—ushering in, along the way, a newly powerful penal state whose consequences, and racial skew, are a serious concern nearly a century later.

Liberty and Coercion: The Paradox of American Government, by Gary Gerstle, Ph.D. ’82 (Princeton, $35). From the University of Cambridge, where he is now Mellon professor of American history, the author delivers a sweeping analysis of the conflicts inherent in a system comprising a constitutionally limited federal government, powerful states, and their overlapping roles in protecting or constricting personal liberty. He explores the unsettled resolution of these rival claims from the eighteenth century to the present.

Presence, by Amy Cuddy, associate professor of business administration (Little, Brown, $28). The author, a social psychologist (profiled in “The Psyche on Automatic,” November-December 2010, page 48) and TED-circuit star, counsels on
one decisive event. “I’m here in America because of Tiananmen Square,” says the 43-year-old composer. “I was a protestor.”

Under other circumstances, Liang might simply have been a prodigy: his upbringing in Beijing included piano lessons, and he started composing at age six, when he grew bored with his practice pieces. His mother, Liang-yu Cai, was the first Chinese musicologist to study American music in the United States. Liang says he “grew up” in the archives of the Music Research Institute of the Chinese Academy of Arts where she taught, and where his encounters with field recordings gave him an early and unusual connection with China’s past. His father, Mao-chun Liang, a professor at the Central Conservatory of Music, pioneered the study of music in Beijing included piano lessons, and he started composing at age six, when he grew bored with his practice pieces. His mother, Liang-yu Cai, was the first Chinese musicologist to study American music in the United States. Liang says he “grew up” in the archives of the Music Research Institute of the Chinese Academy of Arts where she taught, and where his encounters with field recordings gave him an early and unusual connection with China’s past. His father, Mao-chun Liang, a professor at the Central Conservatory of Music, pioneered the study of music during the Cultural Revolution; for a time after the unrest in Tiananmen Square, he was banned from publishing.

For two months, Liang protested in the square every day, until, as violence erupted, his parents locked him in his room; a family friend, concerned for his safety, made arrangements for the 16-year-old to study piano at the University of Texas, Austin, and attend a local high school on scholarship. Living with a family of fundamentalist Christians was a culture shock. “They had no radio, no TV,” he remembers. “I played piano for hymns during early-morning prayers.” But Liang’s relocation also began a process of reimagining China from outside its borders. Being allowed to roam the University’s library—the first he’d ever seen with open shelves—blew his mind. Liang earned his bachelor’s and master’s degrees in composition from New England Conservatory (NEC), in Boston, while working in construction, walking dogs, and waiting tables in Chinatown. “I was famous at NEC for being one of the poorest students,” he says. “At McDonald’s, one hamburger was $3.25. I had $1 a day to live on, and many formulas for how to survive.” He kids that, even with today’s increased cost of living, “I still think it’s possible.”

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Spinning Mambo into Salsa
by Juliet McMains ’94 (Oxford, $35 paper). A University of Washington dance historian (previous book: ballroom; on deck: tango) studies the evolution of salsa in New York, Los Angeles, and Miami. Exhaustively detailed and copiously illustrated. Those whose coordination, or joints, are suspect should probably not try to enact the footing diagrams without competent help near at hand.

Love the Stranger
by Jay Deshpande ’06 (YesYes Books, $16). “The body/cries out when it learns it is here for love/and is the stranger for this calling,” writes the poet in this debut collection. His verse spans fields and forests, boyhood memories and lovers’ beds—and features cameos by Miles Davis and Kim Kardashian.

America’s War Machine
by James McCartney, NF ’64, with Molly Sinclair McCartney, NF ’78 (St. Martin’s $26.99). A pair of journalists’ collaborative take on the “vested interests [and] endless conflicts” that have been associated with the military-industrial complex. As for the period following, or between, wars, Richard Crowder, M.P.A. ’07, himself a diplomat, examines the transition from empires to the U.S.-U.S.S.R. contest, and efforts to give life to internationalism, in Aftermath: The Makers of the Postwar World (I.B. Tauris, $35), a group portrait of Roosevelt, Churchill, Stalin, de Gaulle, et al.
At NEC, his principal teacher, Robert Cogan, instilled in him both thoughtfulness and a willingness to take his time in study. At Harvard for his Ph.D., Liang worked to “build his musical muscle,” developing the skills to materialize his ideas. It was a transitional period for the composition faculty.

“Every semester, there was a new visitor: Harrison Birtwistle, Magnus Lindberg, Chaya Czernowin, Lee Hyla,” he recalls. “So I was able to take lessons from everyone and loved it.”

Yet the person he considers his single most important teacher was not a composer. Ethnomusicologist Rulan Chao Pian, an expert on Chinese traditions and one of Harvard’s first tenured women faculty members, housed him for eight years and shared her personal treasure house of rare volumes and recordings with him. He states unequivocally: “I was reminded by Rulan Pian how wide this world is.”

Now Liang’s own breadth of knowledge and depth of understanding can be felt in each of his compositions. Cuatro Corridos, a chamber opera about human trafficking, drew from the stories he heard while waiting tables alongside undocumented Chinese immigrants. Hearing Landscapes, a multimedia performance in which a series of compositions accompany high-resolution, multispectral scans of landscape paintings by twentieth-century master Huang Binhong, allows Liang’s sense of geography to take on physical dimensions. Sound moves through a multichannel 360-degree space, taking its direction from the brush strokes of Huang’s calligraphy. A new commission based on these paintings, titled A Thousand Mountains, A Million Streams, will be premiered by the Boston Modern Orchestra Project in 2017.

While composing Xiaoxiang, Liang found a field recording of a folk melody from the area of Hunan where the murder and ensuing incident took place. He’s not usually one to borrow musical material, but “stories like these,” he points out, “have been part of Chinese literature since the Song dynasty, for over a thousand years.” During a particularly striking moment in the concerto, that melody bursts forth, offering the listener temporary solace from the concerto and its anxious hauntings.