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# Rise of pop idol pianists

Classical music is witnessing the birth of a new sensation: players worshipped by female fans.

**Robert Beale** looks at two coming to Manchester

**T**HERE'S a new phenomenon on the classical music scene these days – the pop idol pianist.

Everybody knows young trained singers are often marketed for their looks as well as their voices, and now so are violinists such as Vanessa Mae and Sarah Chang.

But the idea that a man who sits at the piano could have a cool image and a young fan following is pretty new.

Manchester is seeing two visitors in the next fortnight, however, who are proving how it can be done.

First up is the Chinese superstar, Lang Lang. He's been known to the classical audience here for a few years, since he first played for the Hallé, on account of his prodigious virtuosity – the sort of skill that makes light of music which even the world's best players find tricky.

But back home the 25-year-old has armies of young admirers and girls who are desperate

to get close to him if they can.

His last recital at the Bridgewater Hall, in October 2005, proved that the adulation had spread to Manchester's Chinese community, too. He wore his hair long, a big necktie and wide lapels, and the girls in his audience were in near-hysterics.

And he knew how to work a crowd: there was a tantalising pause before he went for his encores.

In New York they say he's 'the hottest artist on the classical music planet', and he's been on the Jay Leno show and Sesame Street. He's an international goodwill ambassador for Unicef, and he's already got his own

**CARNEGIE HALL DATE**

Warren Mailley-Smith is playing at the famous venue after a St Ann's Church recital

foundation to get children into classical music.

Perhaps it should be said that he is also a master of his art. Some critics have found the crowd-pleasing just too much and accused him of shallowness despite his astonishing gifts. I find his musical insights remarkable.

And 10 days after Lang Lang, there's a visit from a young British pianist who could be moving into the same territory. His name's Warren Mailley-Smith, and his recital at St Ann's Church is a dry run for his debut at the Carnegie Hall in New York. He's playing the same programme, with a second half dominated by Chopin, for both.

Warren, 31, who trained in Birmingham, has been a Classic FM 'hot property of the week' and his playing called 'sensational'. He's made successful appearances at the key London venues and is climbing up the ladder of prestige venues and organisations. I asked Warren



**A SENSATION** Pianist Lang Lang has pop star status in China. The 25-year-old has hordes of female admirers and on a visit to Manchester many in the audience were in near-hysterics

what he felt about being marketed by the image-builders.

"I have always thought that 'image' is an essential consideration for classical soloists, young or established," he said.

"We live in a publicity-driven world and one where classical music is trying to draw in new audiences.

"I try to use photographers who I feel comfortable with and who can bring out a range of images from a shoot."

What was the image he was looking for, then?

"I wouldn't say I do 'cool' particularly well, but I just try to be as natural as possible. It's amazing what can be done with digital editing... audiences often barely recognise me when I walk on to the stage!" Warren admits that, on average, he probably has more ladies than men in his audiences. But he's not ashamed of going for a fan following.

"All classical music needs is for performers to be sold in the same way as pop musicians to develop a major profile," he

says, "and it has been achieved already in the UK – although mainly with singers. Katherine Jenkins and Russell Watson spring to mind.

"And a lot of gigging classical musicians I know in the UK are about as rock and roll as it comes!"

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» **Lang Lang plays the Bridgewater Hall on Monday January 21, and Warren Mailley-Smith is at St Ann's Church, Manchester on January 31.**

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## Review

# Gun violence that divides the generations

**Re:Play/Different Perspectives**  
Library Theatre

AS WE reflect in our own annual MEN Theatre Awards, brand new theatre is constantly being created across Manchester and Salford in non-traditional venues – above pubs (such as Studio Salford at the King's Arms), underneath bars (such as Taurus), or in all sorts of unusual places during the 24:7 Festival.

But too often this work has very short runs in small-capacity venues.

Frequently, these productions have limited

publicity budgets and they don't get seen enough, even though they're often, quite frankly, much better than the big-budget shows elsewhere in town. That's where the Library Theatre's Re:Play comes in. Until January 26, they'll be showcasing some of the best of this work.

Their mini-festival opened with Different Perspectives, an affecting and inventive one-man show written and performed by Marcus Hercules and directed by Benji Reid.

Developed over two years at Contact, it tells the story of a challenging relationship between a Jamaican-born

**BLOOD ON THE BOARDS**

The violent, affecting and inventive Different Perspectives

father, who yearns for the days when you wouldn't get shot just for stepping on someone's foot at a reggae dance, and his son Wayne.

Integrating film into the live performance, this modern-day tragedy also features several

other characters, such as the fearsome Floyd Brown, and some scenes of violence to rival even the bloodiest Jacobean tragedy.

■ **RE:Play** also features: Mind The Gap (until Thursday/tonight); An Englishman's Home (Thursday/today-Saturday); The Game Of Two Halves (Friday-Saturday); The Lullaby Witch (Monday 21-Wednesday); The Rehearsal (Tuesday 22-Wednesday); Karry Owky (Thursday 24-Sunday); Concrete Ribbons (Thursday 24-Sunday); and Father's Day (Friday 25-Saturday)

Kevin Bourke