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Music will never die: A reflective narrative of an aspiring young man (1977-2013)

Li Jia ^{1,2}

¹ College of Music, Shanxi Normal University, Linfen, Shanxi041099, China

² International College, Krirk University, Thanon Ram Intra, Khwaeng Anusawari, Khet Bang Khen, Krung Thep, Maha Nakhon10220, Thailand

Corresponding Author: Li Jia

Abstract

This article is a self-narrative of a young boy who has kept his music dream going all the way. Written in a reflective and retrospective manner, the story of Li Jia as a neighborhood boy shows how music as a special power can stimulate a

person, against all odds, to pursuit his dream one way or another. It tells us a simple reason: music will never die as long as you keep it deep in your heart.

Keywords: Li Jia, Narrative, Music



A native Shanghaiese, Prof. Dr. Li Jia (Born, 1977/4/7) is a Chinese pianist, composer and musicologist. He received his post-graduate diploma (Shanghai Normal University), M.A. in Pop Music Studies (Shanghai Conservatory of Music), M.M. in piano (Sta Isabel College), PhD (Saint Louis University) and post-doctorate (Central Escolar University). He studied piano with such international artists as Prof. Augusto Espino and Prof. Nina Jostel. As a critically acclaimed concert pianist and composer, he has won over 50 international piano and composition competitions, including St. Peter-burg International Piano Competition, New York International Music Competition, Prokofiev international Music Competition, London Young Artist Music Competition, American Young Artist Music Competition, London International Piano Competition, Bonn International Piano Competition, Moscow International Piano Competition, Canadian International Music Competition, WPTA International Piano Competition, etc. Li Jia published his two volumes of piano solo works by Shanghai Music Publishing House and two piano solo CDs by Guangdong Music Publishing House. He specializes in the works of Baroque and Romantic periods, especially by Bach, Scarlatti and Franz Liszt. His performance venue includes Carnegie Hall, Royal Albert Hall, Bonn Beethovenhaus, Bosendorfer Hall at Mozarthaus, Vienna Ehrbar Hall, Etc. As a scholar, Li Jia published more than 70 papers in journals and conference. Li Jia currently teaches Masters Students at Shanxi Normal University and PhD Students at Krirk University Thailand. Besides, he is also a professor in piano for several colleges, including Nanyang Institute of Science and Technology, etc. Li Jia gives around 30 solo recitals annually in China and beyond and works as editor for several international journals, such as Educational Science: Theory &Practice (Scopus-indexed), Journal of Art &Design, Education Journal, Journal of Higher Education Research and Educational Research and Review.

When I was Young

Being an enterprising and inquisitive music lover, I have been trying to explore the world through the effective and insightful communication with people and surroundings wherever I am. I can vividly remember one night in late 1989, when I, a 12 - year-old boy, awaked from the soothing comforts of the luxurious bed in Westin Hotel Shanghai, the stunning Shanghai TV Tower exhibited a pearlescent white against the blue of the sky and the sea, while the monumental Yangpu Bridge stands majestically for all to see. The whole Shanghai city was a palette of exuberant colors, all vying for my attention. I could feel the platonic soul communication between me and the wordless environment. I walked the narrow, winding aisles discovering Westin's vibrant history, and picked up interesting items from different cultures (Arabic, Russian, Polish, etc) at the quaint shops and boutiques along the way, all with a succinct English description in a tag form for me to know them more in details. Somewhere near and far between, I could hear the live performance of the first movement of Beethoven Piano Trio "The Duke" by three talented young students from Shanghai Conservatory of Music. As I stepped into the French style lobby with wood paneled walls, marble floors and baroque style statues that all together made up an elegant setting suggesting a grand European conservatory, an elegant young lady was caressing the harp to project a celestial soundscape. Passing over the deep tunnel of the coffee bar which featured a live serenade band and fine collection of decades - old black LP collection of broad - way songs, I was ushered into another mesmerizing music heaven of jazz where a 5 piece bop band was pushing the complexity of rhythm change to its extremity by tuning the Charlie Parke's "Blues for Alice". Stepping out of elevator and was ushered into the grandeur lobby, I pumped into crowds of travelers from all over the world that were checking in over the counter while greeting with each other by the same topic - "How do you like the music here?" I suddenly realized the unifying power of the management of arts in the context of such a sophisticated and delicate space of interweaving illustrations that transcended the boundary of time. As a somewhat blossoming and dewy-eyed young boy that was trying to straight up his mind about the track of his life path, a logic self-reflection popped up to my mind, "Why not be determined to be a cool art entrepreneur as my future career goal to help more Chinese people get exposed to the beauty of arts.

Since that memorable night at Westin, I started being serious and enthusiastic about learning arts and management. I spent a lot of time reading feeling that this benefited me by encouraging me to develop and learn quickly. I had a vivid imagination as a child, possibly influenced by my interest in the captivating work of such authors as Michael Kaiser, Vegor Dobrogarsky and Edna Landau. Nowadays I still enjoy reading ardently in my spare time. It is impossible for me to choose my favorite book, but I have taken pleasure numerous times in reading such great title as "Arts Marketing Insights" by Bersten, Joanne Scheft and Kotber, a book which I find penetrating and deeply illuminating and is definitely one of my favorites.

Scene B

Late night Shanghai was more frozen out during that Christmas time in 1996 than ever before. The cold air in a small classroom of Shanghai University the blackboard of which was crammed with dozens of music notes and musicians' name seemed to be stifling a lonely and only

torso in the building. It was me, a first-year student in sociology of this institute with a focus on music sociology and China folk music research and this scenario has been pretty much usual as a daily routine ever since then. Even though myself still being a Freshman cadet, my interest and hobby had already been pegged at sitting on the classroom podium, accompanied by the afternoon sun streaming into the oblique classroom blackboard camouflaged by the chalk dust which faded out into crickets' symphonic time of late nights gradually and unnoticeably, with a whisper of the moment of silence- the music of silence. All in all, for me, throwing oneself into the kind of taken-for-granted things by the many of my same age like a luring romance of casual on-campus dating, out of campus pocket money making or hanging out in the late night pubs could never compare to the joy of an instant comprehension of a first-time-met theorem or a never-imagined workout on the most tricky task in sociological research of music which I believe is an important approach to arts management.

Scene C

Shanghai during the frozen winter of 2001 was so desperate for some dramatic stimulation to proper its seemingly pale and stagnant social life and thoughts that the downturn trends of the Chinese music market brought about. The late night's drizzling and chilly wind wouldn't stop my inclined inhabitants from flocking to local disco for a mesmerizing moment to worship my favorite guitarist Paul Gilbert of "Mr. Big" and his sage of "To Be with You". The fabulous performance of the band and the waves of applause from thousands of audience made me, the marketing director of Tom Lee Music and organizer of this concert felt greatly rewarded and fulfilled. After years of painstaking research on arts management, especially in the area of arts marketing I began to finally reap the harvest in the fields of arts marketing. While tracking back to all the way along that I passed through, I suggest that, an understanding of why I want to devote myself to this field cannot be fully explored without a review of my growing path. So here starts my story

The very early days

All in a word, my artistic development can be best described as a life trajectory of "being against all the odds." I was born in a very unnoticeable and ordinary family that just passed through those turbulent pages of any Chinese history book. Being a teacher and a worker, both of my parents actually did not have too much interest in music and it was obviously weird for them to observe me singing the then trendy tunes by Deng Li Jun and Zhang Min Ming at the age of three or four alone when the radio was on. However, those were the only music available for me, the only little pieces of information which will lead me to the Pandora's Box in the years to come. "I did not understand how this world works" just as 15 years later in that sensational master piece of motion picture "Titanic" what the boy named Jack indoctrinated the lay he died for and whereby the music by James Honer was so reminiscent of those very early days in my life. I just felt it was so wonderful to live with and breathe the music of eternity and I really liked it. That was the prelude to my life-time arts-affiliation.

First piano lesson

One day during my middle school, when I was a boy with a dream of musical life but also desperate in the wish to have a serious close up exploration of the esoteric magic of music in

a comparatively formal setting, the first theatrical moment for my life came belatedly somehow and at last. When the moment my parents got a honky-tonky “Nieer” - brand piano moved up into that already crammed room, nothing in this world could be more unbelievable and unaffordable for a family that possessed only 20 square meter living space. “Am I too old for my old dream?” however, after the transient ecstasy, I began to question myself since I usually observed that most of successful musicians came from a very early period of professional training like Mozart. But luckily, the music dream seemed to be so powerful for me that things turned to break through the initial limits of the idea of my parents which was to simply let me enjoy music as a hobby rather than a profession. I began to devote more and more time into piano practicing even though we could not afford a professional piano teacher for at least the first 6 years of my study. However, I was so grateful already that at least I had a piano of my own and if music art was a destiny for me to be connected to it; I would never spoil the blessings. My daily practicing period increased from 1 hour to 5 hours in the first year, and I passed the National Piano Test Grade 3, 5, 7, 10 within 4 continuous years between 1989 and 1993, which was a rather amazing achievement for the people around me.

College Time

As one of the top student from Chao Yang No. 2 middle School (a top - tier high school in Shanghai), I garnered the honor to study sociology with a focus on Music Sociology at Shanghai University, which was an altar motor to such media guru as Hong Liu of “3 - 5 pm popular music time from Shanghai People’ s Radio”, even though my parents suggested me to study Law or Accounting which would possibly leading me to a more lucrative future. However, the meantime, I started to look at the music and arts from a farther distance away and took a bigger picture. As the time goes by, I began to realize that music making is only a bolt within the complex mechanism of music industry. There were much more for me to explore such as performance agency, licensing, branding, media, and promotion and etc.. [The corporation between the local and international arts made me holds firmly to the belief that arts industry need professional leadership to make it more regulated and robust.] The solution to this dilemma is to combine arts with the fundamental theories such as sociology, business studies or philosophy, to understand the mechanism through which people create artistic ideas, organize their group together to maximize their talents (Ex. a band or any artistic school of thoughts) and the market regulates all these creativity towards a value creation for the society. I was especially into such interesting topic as cultural anthropology, sociology and management, etc., from which I expanded my horizons by gaining insights of how people were organized in the specific contexts of cultures and develop the idiosyncratic voices through artistic activities (such as jazz improvisation, community music programs, and marketing of arts in the context of consumerism and post - consumerism society). On top of academic efforts, I started composition projects in the style of new age and pop. Especially by attending the concert of Yanni, Secret Garden, and George Winston in China. I personally experienced the complexity of the way a live show should be organized and presented, which called for mastering the skills of arts management. I felt more and more intensively that Chinese performance industry could not break the bottle neck without the education of art management talents of international standard. Comparing to the shows from the local bands, the audience could tell clearly

the difference in the aspects of aesthetics orientation, the concert philosophy and audience development, concert programming, audio - visual effects and venue regulation, etc. I began to realize that music talent is not the whole story and China has many talents which should be at par with those international stars. However, due to various reasons, a lack of a well - developed market and sound arts management leadership, there was a real plight for China to get closer to its Western competitors in arts aspect. The Chinese academia had been too conservative in its artistic approach to music and arts, thus making itself far legged - behind in the staple social music consumption patterns out of such reasons as the deviation between the development music needs from genres of different popular styles and the lack of social cultural infrastructure, the combination of music and other art forms (movie, painting, visual effects), comparing to the production of live concert series like “The Wall” or “Wish You Were Here” by Pink Floyd. And all these could be partially attributed to the underdevelopment of the research on Arts Management in China as a discipline while in USA such areas had already been explored in solid ways. To continuously gaining insightful ideas of arts management, I begun to study Management at Shanghai Jiao Tong University Evening School and finished their program of undergraduate course in Management in late 2000.

On the fly and rebirth

On graduation in 2000, I took a brief stint with Red 52 Recording Studio as MIDI engineer before finally being hired by Tom Lee Music HK Shanghai branch as a Marketing Director. The real life challenges came finally to check out how much I knew all about the arts management after 4 years study since I would be up for talking to the “big names” in the industry like Mr. Big, Van Helen, Roger Waters, Steve Vai, Wynton Mansalis, etc. for various endorsement projects as part of the marketing plans for different top industrial brands like Korg and Yamaha. During my two years service for Tom Lee, 50 or 60 concerts/clinic were organized throughout Mainland China, Hongkong and Japan. For one thing, I was so much thrilled to have a close - up chat with those luminaries during their tours; even personally getting some chops from them (Billy Sheehan taught me how to slap bass after his clinic in Shanghai. For another, all of these things challenged my skills in managing the staff, the artist, the business, the brand and the toughest part - the mindset of the audience. Every event I organized stand as a milestone for my career, however, I gradually felt the inadequacy in my knowledge base which leads me to decide to do a masters’ degree for a rebirth as a new being to reshape my brain and get more in - depth know-how on music industry, especially pop music. Despite of the heavy schedule from working, I finally got accepted into the masteral program at Shanghai Conservatory of Music under the tutelage of Professor Tao Xin as the overall second - placer of 2002 graduate school entrance exam. From a completely “amateur” to “professional”, an “outsider” to “insider”, my three years study at SHCM gave me valuable experiences and opportunities. From signing endorser to being appointed as the endorser for Carmen piano series by Shanghai Piano Co. Ltd (the other endorser of the company was the famous pianist Mr. Kong Xiang Dong for “Strauss” piano series) in 2003 and being sponsored with a 6 - piano - concerts - tour in Shanghai with my own band performing my original music, I began to feel the sort of reward after years of commitment to my dream against all the difficulties and

unfavorable conditions in my life. At the same time, I had a more personal and in depth understanding about being the “spot - light on the stage” which the previous experience as the backstage staff could never afford to give. I understood more clearly the needs from the position of the artists per se for a live commercial show. This could be further illustrated when Shanghai Music Publishing House approached me to publish two volumes of my piano works with the contract signing. My study at SHMC was rounded off with a thesis on Oscar Peterson’s Jazz Piano Music and another two Hi Fi CD albums contracts with Guan Dong State Music Publishing House, <<White Piano >> and <<Red Piano >>, both being among the top market sellers in 2007 as the statistic showed. Being an artist on - stage while managing a crew of staff for my own music projects let me practice art - management skills at a more personal and holistic level.

PRE-Ph.D Period

Immediately after my graduation from SHCM, I started working as a music major teacher at Shanghai Institute of Film Arts, College of Pop Music. I was able to connect with some of the local front - line artist such as Andy Liu, Lao Lang and Yu Quan, to name a few. Especially the dean of the college was one of the investor of <<Sister’s Percussion >> one of the most successful local new age/world music albums in China, I was able to personally get more insights of successful music investment and pop star management. Besides, I began to organize my own group of artists, worked as a performance agency and accepted commercial live shows concerts from bars, hotels, company events, clients including BMW, St. Regis Hotel, Mariot Hotel, Dr. Beer Bar/Restaurants, etc. I gained first hand skills in small - scale events planning and show coordinating as well as enjoyed connecting with both local and overseas talents and being member of them as keys/backup vocals.

Overseas and PhD

The reason that I would like to do a PhD overseas were several - fold: Firstly, I wanted to hone my English in a native environment. Though during my stint at Tom Lee, the working language was English, I felt the urgency to boost it up one step further to be closer to native level. Secondly, I believed that life abroad would challenge my cultural perspectives and make me more organized, mature and explorative. Thirdly, from the perspective of disciplinary development, I did believe that absorbing western management ideas and theories would be a perfect solution to move my career a step up. Moreover, I decided to balance my knowledge in different ways to make it more comprehensive and supplementary to each other. Basically, I finished further advanced graduate researches in three directions: A) Management and related: on top of MBA - PhD course from Saint Louis University with a focus on music marketing, I finished a Masters in Development communication since I realized the power of media in arts marketing. Also the post-doctoral research at IAME with international famous economist Emmanuel Santos (United Nation Speaker) clarified many of my misunderstanding about the music industry and social cultural infrastructure in South East Asia. B) Music: I believed that a solid grasp of artistic skills could be conducive to art management, so I did a Master of Music in classical piano and moved up to PhD music program major in music theory. C) Other related areas: since my background was from sociology, so a PhD in applied anthropology should not be of too much surprise as a re - cap of my previous learning. As an educator, a PhD in

development education could definitely enhance my teaching style and approaches which further lead me to a post - doctoral diploma in education at Central Escolar University. With a special interest in English language, PhD in English with a thesis on Sting’s Lyric composition greatly enhanced my knowledge of the meaning in the context of pop cultures. Besides, as an ardent would - be leader and manager, A PhD in industrial psychology could be a reasonable logic end. During the 6 years overseas period, I jammed at lot with talented foreigner musicians, did field trip a lot deep into the aboriginal communities and observed musicing process and community arts infrastructure as well as music education system, laughed a lot with friends from different countries that shared the same interest as mine in arts and management and the most importantly, changed a lot, from a boy to a man, a single guy to a married person, an innocent and native kid to a human of more complicated thoughts. I gave recitals around, took part in several piano competitions and garnered several honors as far as I could go. I presented my papers and researches intensively to keep myself moving, including several important conferences in music such as ICTM 2012. I was not the best in this world, but, I could one day at least tell my parents that I did the best I could as what the Lord blessed me with, and I did not let them down.

On the Outlook

On returning to Shanghai early 2013, I started from working as the senior writer for New Oriental Education Group, USA application section and a senior teacher of TOEFL/SAT/GRE at Longre Education Group. However, I hold a dream, that very dream since the very beginning of my artistic exploration journey to live a life that can combine arts and management while maximizing my expertise in both sides. I am on the outlook forward, to another change in my life; a more arts management oriented one which can maximize my talents and career objective. However, whatever future leads me to, I feel deeply honored and grateful to the people that brought me to this world and taught me one way or another, to the ones that I loved and those loved me, to the ones that connect me to this world and help me get out of my box and breathe. As the title of the Toscanini’s biography goes: Music will never die! My future life will focus on this simple question: how to let music as an art influence and change the society in a more efficient and effective way, to make music itself more available to everyone, regardless of their social and finances status and free the human from all the “odds” that can possibly make a should - be common human right a special privilege exclusive to them. The world will be more beautiful if the whole society will be connected and united through more approachable music programs initiated by best both public and private sectors, isn’t it? Here the Journeys starts.....

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