

## The Chopin Whisperer

Oberlin professor Dang Thai Son conquered one of the world's most prestigious piano competitions. Now his students are doing the same.

by Erich Burnett



*Oberlin piano professor Dang Thai Son (left) is a legend at the Chopin Competition. Dang's students, including second-year piano major JJ Bui, are establishing legends of their own.*

People who know about piano tend to know about [Dang Thai Son](#).

Widely acclaimed for his interpretations of Chopin, the Oberlin Conservatory professor saw his illustrious career take flight in 1980 when he won first prize at the 10th Chopin

Piano Competition in Warsaw, Poland—one of the world’s most revered and most rigorous musical competitions. He has devoted the four decades since to performing and teaching around the world, earning accolades everywhere he goes.

Today, Dang’s students are following in the master’s footsteps in almost unbelievable ways.

In October, Oberlin second-year piano major JJ Bui advanced to the finals of the [18th Chopin Piano Competition](#). He was joined by Bruce Xaiyou Liu, a 24-year-old pianist who has studied at Oberlin as a fellow of the [Oberlin-Como Piano Academy](#).

Seventeen-year-old Bui—the youngest pianist to advance to the finals this year—finished sixth, bringing members of the jury to tears with his emotive performances.

Liu earned first prize.

Yet another standout Oberlin student and Dang protégé, third-year pianist Kai-Min Chang of Taiwan, also qualified for the competition but was ousted in the quarterfinal round, after performing through an illness.

At the last Chopin Competition, in 2015, Dang’s students earned third, fourth, and fifth prize—*half of all the prizes awarded that year*.

In nearly a century of the Chopin Competition, Dang is the only champion to mentor another pianist to victory. He's also seemingly the only one with so many students who earn the right to compete there. His profound impact on young pianists is among the worst-kept secrets around.

“Every day, I get emails now with parents saying, *My son is eight years old...can he take lessons with you?*” says the teacher with the oversized laugh and the gentle disposition.

*Not now* is invariably the answer, but perhaps the time will come.

### **The House that Dang Built**

Born and raised in Vietnam, Dang Thai Son began his own piano studies with his mother, Thai Thi Lien, co-founder of what is known today as the Vietnam National Academy of Music. As a boy growing up in a remote village, he played on dilapidated pianos that were rescued from his mother’s school in Hanoi amid a rain of bombs from U.S. warplanes. Discovered during a visit to Vietnam by Russian pianist Isaac Katz, a young Dang eventually took up studies at the Moscow Conservatory, where his teachers included Vladimir Natanson and Dmitri Bashkirov.

Since winning the Chopin Competition, he has performed with virtually every major orchestra across Europe and alongside the likes of Yo-Yo Ma, Mstislav Rostropovich, Pinchas Zukerman, and numerous other legendary musicians.

Still beloved in his native Vietnam, Dang has called Montreal home for many years, and he was the winner of Canada's Prix Opus in 2016 for what was deemed the finest concert of the year. Two years later, he arrived in Oberlin to begin the first true faculty position of his extensive teaching career.

"This time is different," he said at the time of his appointment. "I have decided to change my life by joining the music family at the Oberlin Conservatory, which has truly welcomed me. I very much look forward to building our new house together."

Bruce Liu, (right), JJ Bui, and Kai-Min Chang all gained their first exposure to Oberlin through the Thomas and Evon Cooper International Competition for Piano: Liu in 2012, and Bui and Chang in 2018. Held on Oberlin's campus, the biennial event awards some \$50,000 in prizes to the top finishers. Liu and Chang each won second prize in their respective years; Bui, at 14 one of the youngest pianists in his field, was knocked out in the first round.



In the 2018 finals, in which the three remaining participants each presented a concerto with the Cleveland Orchestra in its home venue of Severance Hall, Chang turned in a scintillating rendition of the E-minor piano concerto by—*who else?*—Chopin.

He professed his long-held love of Chopin in a video made for this year's competition.



"I remember the first piece I practiced by Chopin was his Scherzo No. 1 in B Minor," Chang recalled. "I practiced this piece when I was 10 years old, and I found it so difficult because my hands were really small."

Dang praises Chang (left) for his technical skill. "He's a solid pianist with balanced sensibility," he says. "He's very rational and steady." Dang adds that Chang is all but certain to return to the Chopin Competition in 2025.

Bui also arrived in Oberlin with Chopin at the ready: His finals performance of the Cooper Competition would have been the composer's other piano concerto, the F minor.

“Chopin is one of the composers closest to my heart,” Bui says. “I feel I really connect with Chopin on a deeper level. It comes more naturally to me than music by some other composers, and his music really speaks to me and really touches me.”

Bui’s mentor sees another benefit: “If someone is able to play Chopin,” Dang says, “other music comes much more easily.”



*Oberlin piano professor Dang Thai Son leads a master class presented by the Oberlin-Como Piano Academy. (photo by Dale Preston '83)*

Bruce Liu, too, honed his chops at Oberlin as a fellow of the Oberlin-Como Piano Academy, an exclusive partnership with the esteemed Italian institution. Each year, master teachers from both sides of the Atlantic work with three fellows selected from an international pool of candidates. Como teachers hold weeklong residencies on campus throughout the year—an arrangement that benefits not just the program’s students, but all Oberlin piano students.

Perhaps it is coincidence—or at least good fortune—that a number of Dang’s students live relatively near to him in Canada. Leading up to Chopin in the fall, Bui and Liu continued their studies with Dang through regular lessons at his home—a brief commute for Montreal-resident Liu, but a drive of some five hours from Bui’s home in Toronto.

“In the summer, I had a ‘Chopin Olympic Training Camp,’” Dang says gleefully, referring to intensive study at his home, attended by Bui, Liu, and Chang. “Every week,

we would do mini competitions, round by round. It was very much like going to the Olympics: You start in your region, then you go on to nationals, and then to internationals.”

Fittingly, Dang refers to the musicians in his charge as his *team*. It’s a term he uses with a profound sense of affection.

While he teaches undergraduate students exclusively at Oberlin, he also mentors a small number of graduate-level students at the New England Conservatory and several others in private study. Incredibly, *six* Dang students qualified for this year’s Chopin Competition, with four of them advancing at least to the second round.

### **Just Focus on the Music**

Founded in 1927, the Chopin Competition is presented once every five years by the Fryderyk Chopin Institute. The 2020 competition—held this fall after a one-year pandemic delay—saw a record number of applicants: more than 500 in all. Among them, 160 were selected to submit video-recorded performances; from there, 87 were invited to compete in Warsaw, where Chopin himself was born and raised. Each successive round trims the field approximately in half: from 87 to 45, then from 45 to 23, and from 23 to 12. In a typical year, six prizes are awarded; jurors this year opted to honor the final eight pianists.

“For these young artists, it’s such great exposure to the world,” says Dang, who became the first Asian-born musician to win the competition at the time of his 1980 title.

In recent years, Dang has become something of a Chopin Competition institution, serving on the Warsaw jury an unprecedented four times: in 2005, 2010, 2015, and again this year.

The Warsaw competition lasts three weeks—significantly longer than most other major competitions. Each successive round highlights a different facet of Chopin’s creative output: from etudes to dances to sonatas.

“The criteria of the jury is to consider not only the talent of the pianist, but the pianist’s relationship to Chopin’s music,” Dang says. “When you play Bach or Brahms or Prokofiev, they have their own sonority. So when we have a competition like this, we ask *Do they have that sound?*”

“By the third round, we care more about personality. Chopin’s music is music of emotion. Did the pianist’s Chopin touch the audience? Did it touch the jury?”

That Dang encounters so many of his own students at the competition seems nothing more than the result of uncannily astounding mentorship: Chopin jurors play no role in

the selection of participants, and they do not adjudicate performances until the field has been reduced from the initial 500 to 87. Like at most major competitions, Chopin jurors recuse themselves from evaluating performers whom they have taught. Unlike virtually all other competitions, however, the *actual scores* assigned by each juror are made public after the competition—even published on the official website.

Those pianists who fare well at Chopin do so on their own merit. Dang just happens to prepare his students as few others can.



*JJ Bui credits his mentor for helping him block out the distractions inherent at major competitions. (photo courtesy JJ Bui)*

“He gave me a lot of advice during the competition,” Bui says. “The Chopin is probably the most publicized piano competition in the world. There are media and cameras everywhere, and it’s very hard to focus on the music. He told me not to accept too many invitations to this and that, and he told me to isolate myself a little more and just focus on the music.”

The strategy paid off in spectacular ways.

“After the first round, three jurors came to me and they cried,” Dang says. The power of Bui’s performance had brought them to tears.

“He is so young—only 17—but his music is so deep. He is very mature. He has touching and affecting musicianship. He’s a very sensitive type.”

To Dang, the greatest challenge as a teacher is in leaving behind his own tastes and tendencies, and to become attuned instead to the nature of each student.

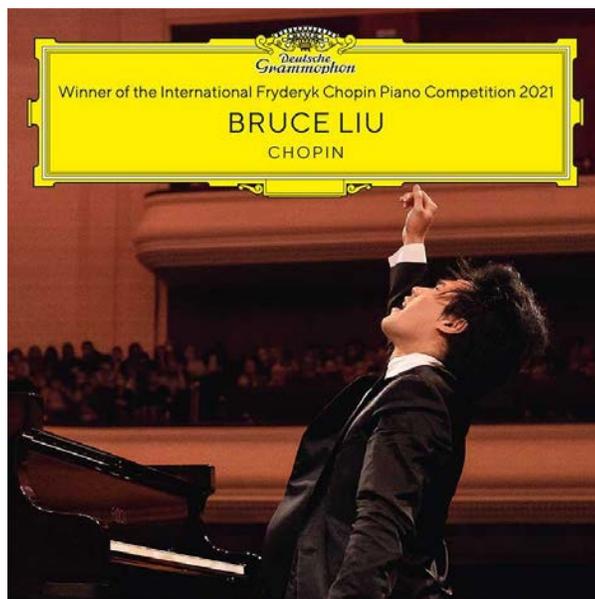


“He’s such an amazing teacher” says Bui (left), who first met Dang during a family trip to Montreal for a recording session sponsored by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. “He cares so much about his students. He has a very specific standard for every student, and that’s great, because it helps each student improve at their own level, as opposed to trying to reach a level that might not be possible at a certain moment. He has very high standards, but he’s very reasonable, he’s very smart, and he knows how to help each student along individually.”

“People say they are *my* students, but they are all so different,” Dang says. “Bruce and JJ are like sun and moon.”

### **A Moment to Exhale**

This year's Chopin Competition was presented worldwide to hundreds of thousands of viewers each day and to packed halls at its home venue, the stately Warsaw Philharmonic Concert Hall. As always, top finishers earned cash prizes, recording opportunities with the Deutsche Grammophon label, and concert engagements throughout the world.



The prestigious label Deutsche Grammophon wasted no time in fêting Chopin champion Bruce Liu, a former fellow of the Oberlin-Como Piano Academy.

Liu's prize package includes 55,000 euros and a lineup of concerts from Asia to Europe to South America. "He said he'll only be home for Christmas!" Dang beams.

"I remember the first time I knew I wanted to go to the Chopin Competition was when I watched the livestream of the 2015 competition," says Bui, echoing sentiments Chang shared during a competition video. "I was watching the finals, and it was really inspiring to see such great artists on that stage, and it motivated me to be part of major piano competitions."

In 2016, Bui was named to a list of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's "30 Under 30"—*at age 12*. In 2019, he participated in the regional Chopin Competition in Beijing, earning fifth prize. He has collected accolades in competitions all over Canada, the U.S., and Europe.

This year, perhaps even more than others, it pays to be precocious: In addition to finishing sixth at the Chopin Competition, Bui was awarded a cash prize for being the youngest finalist.



JJ Bui, seen here in the finals of the 2020 Chopin Competition, brought jurors to tears earlier in the competition. (photo courtesy JJ Bui)

He will perform in 2022 at the U.S. Chopin Foundation's opening gala concert in Miami. It's an invitation that was extended in Warsaw by the head of the foundation *before this year's winners were even determined*.

Today, Bui is beginning his second year at Oberlin and his first on campus, after completing his first year remotely during the pandemic. He arrived in the final week of October—nearly a month later than his classmates, in light of his obligations in Poland.

Amid the world's pandemic-related travel restrictions, Bui's student status was enough to secure him permission to travel to the United States from Canada. His parents weren't permitted to accompany him for his move in at Oberlin; his mentor Dang, too, was required to quarantine in Montreal before returning to campus.

In the first days of November, Bui is still finding his way around campus and acclimating to life on his own schedule.

“It's been fun so far,” he says. “This is really the first time I've lived alone, so I'm just trying to get used to campus and learn where the buildings are.”

He is playing piano and studying remotely with Dang, and he's beginning to consider options for additional study. He has no courses in the College of Arts and Sciences this semester, but he looks forward to pursuing his interest in mythology. Not that he's in any particular hurry.

“It's OK,” he says, “because I could use a little vacation right now.”

*Hear performances from the Chopin Competition on the [Chopin Institute's YouTube channel](#). View master classes, interviews, and more featuring Bruce Liu, JJ Bui, and Dang Thai Son at the 2021 Oberlin-Como Piano Festival on [Oberlin Stage Left](#) and [Oberlin Stage Left's Backstage Pass](#).*

*Published on ClevelandClassical.com November 16, 2021.*

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