

# From folk in the field to opera's grand stage

By CHEN NAN

Dai Yuqiang is the country's most famous opera singer and gives around 200 concerts a year, at home and abroad. At 50, he looks just like the photo on the cover of his debut solo recording released in 2004, with smooth skin, pouty lips and curly hair.

Dai voice astonished producer Tibor Rudas, the man behind the Three Tenors, so much that he quickly arranged Dai's operatic debut in the United States. He even described Dai as the world's "fourth tenor".

Luciano Pavarotti invited Dai to his home in Pesaro, Italy, as his first and only Chinese student. Covent Garden, La Scala and the most prestigious opera houses offered him roles.

In 2011, Dai, together with two of the country's top opera singers, Wei Song and Warren Mok, formed China's Three Tenors. They opened their world tour in Beijing's Great Hall of the People, and have since performed at the Lincoln Center, New York, and the Hong Kong Cultural Centre Concert Hall. They are also scheduled to perform at Usher Hall, Edinburgh, with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra.

During the 2012 Olympic Games, *China's Three Tenors* concert will be performed as part of Beijing Culture Week in London, presenting a traditional opera repertoire — including works from Rigoletto, Pagliacci and Tosca — along with well-known Chinese songs.

"The Three Tenors have their own distinctive singing styles. When they come together, their voices go together harmoniously," said Zhang Shurong, director of *China's Three Tenors* concert. "Opera in China is booming. More original opera productions have taken place during the past few years. *China's Three Tenors* represents the country's best operatic talent."

Dai agrees and says he has experienced China's passion for opera on his tours of the country.

He grew up in Wen'an, a small town in Hebei province, and never even saw a piano until he was 18. His parents, both farmers, loved singing folk songs while they worked and this shaped their son's early interest in singing.

"Singing made my parents happy, so I guessed the main function of singing was to bring fun and happiness," Dai said.

He first heard opera on the radio. Though he couldn't understand the lyrics in Italian, he studied it by singing along. And though he dreamed of becoming a singer, he started work at 22 as an engineer in Taiyuan, Shanxi province.

In 1984, he got into a drama school in Beijing, where he was taught to sing in a Chinese style. The first time Dai sang opera was age 30, when he sang Verdi's *Il*

Trovatore, in Chinese.

"When I heard myself singing opera, I was stunned," he recalled. "My classmates joked that it was a God-given gift."

During that time, China's Western operatic training put little emphasis on style and there were no vocal teachers to help singers understand the roles and how to express emotions.

Dai taught himself Italian and recited the lyrics day and night because he was curious about what the lyrics mean. The tenor said that though he studied operatic singing academically, he was still at an entry-level. The turning point in his operatic career was in 2001, when he met Tibor Rudas.

"What happened next helped me know my voice better and become a professional operatic singer," he said.

In June 2001, Beijing hosted the Three Tenors — Pavarotti, Placido Domingo and Jose Carreras — at the Forbidden City. The Central Opera House, which Dai belonged to then, worked with Rudas to provide an orchestra and offered Dai the chance to do a solo.

After the Three Tenors' Beijing concert, Rudas started working with Dai and sent him to Pesaro for six weeks to work with Pavarotti.

"I not only studied with Pavarotti but also with Pavarotti's teacher," Dai said. "Both of them would stand up and clap when I sang in Italian because it was rare for a Chinese to sing opera in Italian. One of the most important things

they taught me was that opera singing requires constant passion and proper control of the voice, depending on the roles' personalities."

He says that one of his most memorable show will always be his appearance with Maria Guleghina and Samuel Ramey in Puccini's *Tosca* at Covent Garden.

"The boots and robe I wore were decades or even 100 years old. The co-stars were all world-class operatic singers. You can imagine how nervous I was," he said. "However when I stood on the stage and listened to my voice, I became confident and relaxed."

His successful debut led him to more singing dates around the world, but Dai was keen to return to his roots in China.

"I love performing for Chinese audiences and watching their expressions. Their sharing attitude makes me excited on stage," he said.

Today, Dai lives with his wife, Liu Yan, and their 16-year-old daughter, who has studied piano from an early age. He also has a few students, who are rising stars in the opera world.

He says his dream now is simply to perform, which is a real and inspiring idea, rather than becoming an operatic celebrity.



China's Three Tenors (from left: Wei Song, Warren Mok and Dai Yuqiang) sing at the Hong Kong Cultural Centre in April.



PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Under the baton of Tan Lihua, Beijing Symphony Orchestra will perform at the Royal Festival Hall of London's Southbank Centre on July 29.

# Let the music play

It will be a prolific season for the Beijing Symphony Orchestra in 2012, with a crowded program that will also see it travelling to the London Olympics, **Mu Qian** reports.

This will be the year of 100 concerts, and the busiest year in the orchestra's history. Apart from a concert in London during the Olympics, the Beijing Symphony Orchestra will also be performing at the Antalya Music Festival in Turkey and appear with the Kolner Philharmonie and Berliner Philharmonie in Germany in September.

On home ground, the orchestra has invited a cast of world-class musicians to visit, including maestros Christoph Eschenbach and Daniel Barenboim. The orchestra has also invited celebrity soloists, and both Herbie Hancock and Lang Lang will be star attractions.

"Compared with the world's leading orchestras, we are still young," the orchestra's music director and principal conductor Tan Lihua said. "And collaborating with world-class musicians will help us grow mature."

Behind the ambitious new season of the Beijing Symphony Orchestra is support from the Beijing municipal government with a generous subsidy of 50 million yuan (\$7.85 million). The support is mainly driven by the new appreciation for Western music as the country develops and parents become more eager to round off their children's education.

China now has the world's third largest number of symphony orchestras, after the United States and Germany, according to China Symphony Development Foundation.

The Association of Chinese Symphony Orchestras under the foundation has 58 member orchestras around the country. More than 20 were started in the last decade.

Beijing alone has at least 15 professional symphony orchestras.

Besides the Beijing Symphony Orchestra under the Beijing Municipal Cultural Bureau, there are also State-level orchestras such as the China National Symphony Orchestra under the Ministry of Culture, and the China Philharmonic Orchestra under the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television.

Founded in October 1977, Beijing Symphony Orchestra turned professional in 1998.

"Most of the first-class orchestras in the world are named after their cities. Given the status of Beijing as a cultural center and international metropolis, Beijing Symphony Orchestra should work to become one of the best orchestras in the world," Tan said.

The 96-member orchestra has 10 international musicians, recruited from Germany, France, Italy, Switzerland and Russia.

And although the orchestra has yet to visit London, many in the United Kingdom have already heard them play.

The orchestra recorded the Games anthem and national anthems for the Beijing Olympic

Games in 2008, a project that involved the recording of 212 works.

These recordings, approved by the International Olympic Committee and its member states and regions, were played at victory ceremonies in Beijing during the 2008 Games and will be played again at the 2012 Olympic Games in London.

The orchestra will also be in London during the Olympic Games, and perform with the London Philharmonic Orchestra at a special gala concert at the Royal Festival Hall of London's Southbank Centre on July 29.

"The London Philharmonic Orchestra is delighted to be working with the Beijing Symphony Orchestra for this unique collaborative gala concert to celebrate this international summer and momentous year, and the passing of the musical baton from Beijing to London," said Timothy Walker, chief executive and artistic director of the London Philharmonic.

At the gala concert, the Beijing Symphony Orchestra will bring a gift to the London Olympic Games — the specially commissioned symphonic poem *Lotus* by Chinese composer Guo Wenjing.

"The easy way out was to create a magnificent piece with a lot of bugles. I also considered using cultural symbols from the host country. In the end, I decided to compose a work

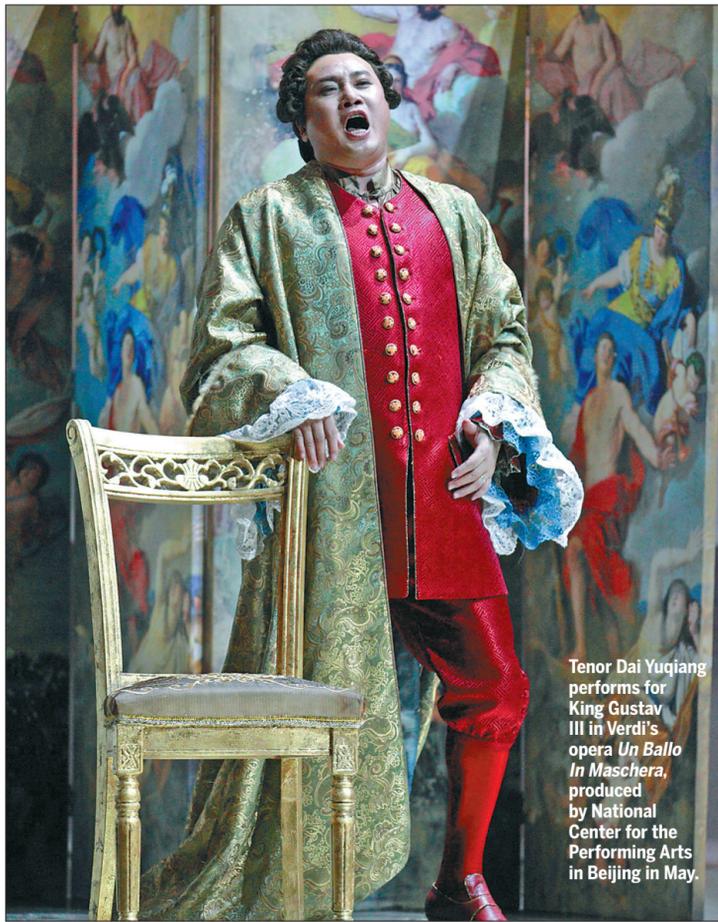
that is more lyrical and Oriental," Guo said. His work brings goodwill and best wishes to the London Olympics.

Another Chinese work to be performed at the concert will be Tang Jianping's *Sacred Fire 2008 — Concerto for Percussion and Orchestra*, which was dedicated to the Beijing Olympic Games. It will feature percussionist Li Biao, who premiered the work with Beijing Symphony Orchestra in 2008.

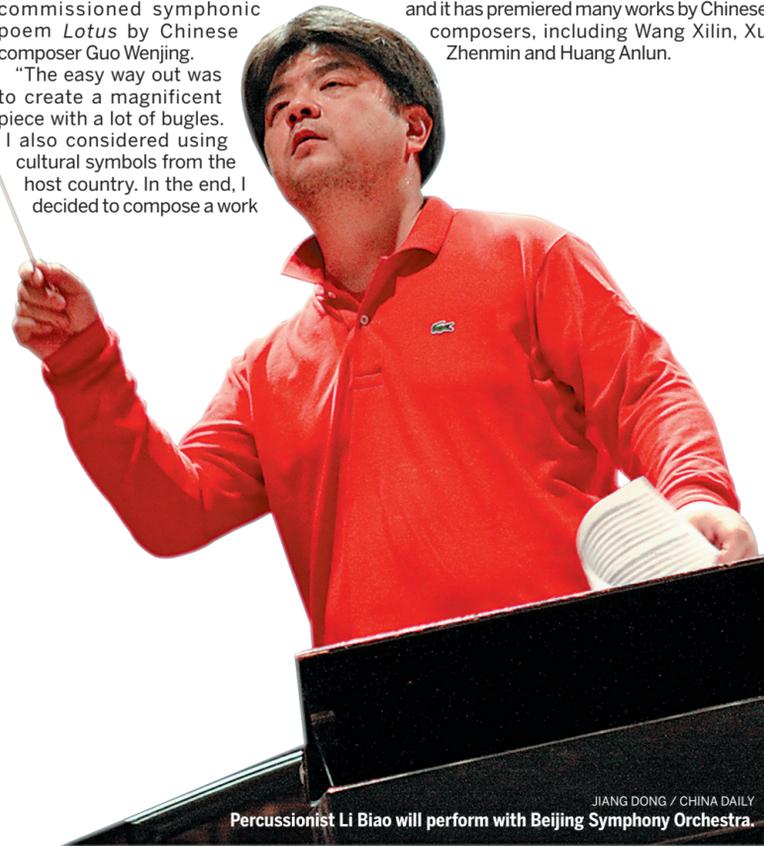
The concert will culminate with a performance of *Beethoven's Symphony No 9, Choral*, with soprano Rebecca Evans, mezzo soprano Ning Liang, tenor Andrew Kennedy, bass Matthew Rose, and the London Philharmonic Choir.

"The world knows more about China's traditional culture, such as Peking Opera and kung fu," Tan said. "We hope to show the UK audience another part of Chinese culture through our concert — Chinese symphonic music."

As the program for London shows, the Beijing Symphony Orchestra takes Chinese works as an important part of its repertoire and it has premiered many works by Chinese composers, including Wang Xilin, Xu Zhenmin and Huang Anlun.



Tenor Dai Yuqiang performs for King Gustav III in Verdi's opera *Un Ballo In Maschera*, produced by National Center for the Performing Arts in Beijing in May.



JIANG DONG / CHINA DAILY  
Percussionist Li Biao will perform with Beijing Symphony Orchestra.