

UC San Diego Composer Lei Liang Awarded Rome Prize

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Dirk Sutro

UC San Diego composer Lei Liang has been awarded the prestigious Rome Prize. The award, announced April 14, is given by the American Academy in Rome each year to approximately 30 artists and scholars, who spend six months to two years at the academy working on new projects.

Liang will devote his time in Rome to finishing a chamber concerto for longtime collaborator Stephen Drury and the New Music Ensemble at the New England Conservatory of Music; and a sextet commissioned by the Southwest Chamber Music ensemble with the Cicada Chamber Music Players.

He may also be inspired to conceive new music. "They told me I can be very flexible as to which projects I pursue," Liang said.

"Lei Liang exemplifies the creativity, innovation and diverse talent at UC San Diego," said Chancellor Marye Anne Fox. "We are proud of him and his work, and congratulate him on receiving this well-deserved, prestigious prize."

Liang joined the UCSD music faculty in 2007 as an assistant professor and was promoted to tenured associate professor in 2010. His career has since been on a steady upward trajectory.

He was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2009, for "stellar achievement and exceptional promise." A CD of his composition "Brush-Stroke," conducted by Drury and with such performers as the Arditti Quartet, was released in 2009. In early April this year, a CD of Liang's "Milou" was issued by New World Records.

On April 14 his composition "Tremors of a Memory Chord" commissioned by the Taipei Chinese Orchestra, premiered at Taipei's National Concert Hall.

"It received a standing ovation from almost 2000 people," said Liang, who attended the concert. "It was one of the most rewarding experiences of my career."

The *New York Times* has called Liang's music "hauntingly beautiful and sonically colorful," while *The Wire* magazine referred to Liang as "one of the most exciting voices in New Music," and the *Washington Post* described a Liang composition as "brilliantly original and inarguably gorgeous."

Schott Music, a prestigious music publisher specializing in contemporary classical music, will publish a saxophone quartet composed by Liang later this spring, which will make the piece widely available for performance.

"That piece is about the history of injustice in China and the people who have sacrificed," said Liang. "I was born into the Cultural Revolution, 1966 to 1976, and was denied access to older traditions of art forms in China. As a teenager, I participated in mass demonstrations and witnessed the bloodshed in Tiananmen Square."

"I made a personal effort to acquire knowledge of traditional Chinese culture by studying and copying classics, sutras, and treatises on paintings by hand. I think of this effort as a way to break down a modern Great Wall that separates me from my own heritage. Thirty years ago, when I was a student living in Beijing, China was dominated by political tyranny. Today, it is dominated by the tyranny of politics and commercialism."

Liang is married to harpsichordist Takae Ohnishi, an adjunct faculty member in UCSD's music department. Their son Albert is 20 months old. Liang's family will accompany him to Rome in September.

"There are very few fellowships that accommodate the whole family, and for me this is a very important part of the Rome Prize."

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