

PRESSBOOK

LEE Mingwei

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Lee Mingwei offers the gift of song at the MFA



DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Performer Teresa Winner Blume put on a costume specially designed for the exhibition “Lee Mingwei: Sonic Blossom.”

By Cate McQuaid | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MARCH 16, 2015

Last Wednesday, Vanessa Moroney brought her 7-year-old son, Aidan, on a special mother-son outing to the Museum of Fine Arts. In the William I. Koch Gallery, they spotted a woman wearing an ornate costume made of two embroidered silk kimono obis. She was soprano Teresa Winner Blume, and she approached the pair.

“May I offer you the gift of song?” she asked Aidan. He agreed, and she led him to a special chair in the gallery, a regal space with a salon-style installation of European paintings and gleaming Hanover silver. Blume stood a short distance away, and sang

to Aidan an art song by Franz Schubert. Her voluptuous voice resounded through the gallery.

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“It was wonderful, and very exciting,” Aidan reported afterward. “I loved it.”

“I was crying,” Vanessa Moroney said. “As a mother, what a gift, to be able to watch my son experience opera for the first time.”

Aidan was among the first museum visitors to take part in artist Lee Mingwei’s “Sonic Blossom,” a performance art project running through April 9, during which classically trained singers bestow songs from Schubert’s lieder on individuals.

Lee Mingwei: Sonic Blossom

Museum of Fine Arts, 465 Huntington Ave., 617-267-9300. <http://www.mfa.org>

Closing date: April 9

Lee, who was born in Taiwan and is based in New York, specializes in works that celebrate the intimacy of gift exchange. In 2000, at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, his project “The Living Room” invited museum staff to share their own collections in a domestic-style space. For “The Moving Garden,” at the Lyon Biennial in 2009, he encouraged visitors to take flowers from a 45-foot-long installation, provided that the flowers be given to strangers.

He was inspired by cultural critic Lewis Hyde’s book “The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property.” He has befriended Hyde, who visited “Sonic Blossom” on Wednesday.

“It’s astounding,” said Hyde. “A trained voice like that penetrates your body, and it’s as if it calls into the body emotion that you’ve related to the song. It’s a feeling you don’t get from looking at a painting.”

The point of a gift, said Lee, is that it is freely bestowed. “A gift is not monetary. It can transcend boundaries between strangers,” he said. “The response can be in the moment or years later.”

For those in the Koch Gallery, the response was immediate. Blume’s next recipient was Sherrill Hunnibell, Aidan’s grandmother, who, together with another grandchild, had met up with the family at the museum. Blume didn’t realize the two were related.

When Hunnibell sat down, “she looked so serene,” Blume said. “I saw her take a deep breath and exhale, and turn her palms upward, which I took as a signal that she was ready to receive.”

As Blume sang, the connection between the performer and her listener transcended the hubbub of school groups in the gallery.

“Her voice was just entering my body in so many ways, I had to open to it,” Hunnibell said.

“Sonic Blossom” debuted at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Seoul in 2013, and has been performed in contemporary-art spaces in Beijing and Tokyo. This is its US premiere, and the first time it has been staged in an encyclopedic museum.

Schubert fits in this European gallery, which spotlights narrative works and portraits by painters such as Titian, Poussin, and El Greco. Indeed, if you can take your eyes away from the singer and the listener, you’ll find that the Schubert lieder provide a stirring complement to the paintings.

Lee has trained eight soloists, who choose one of five songs to sing. The songs are roughly four minutes long. They revolve around a central idea, said Jen Mergel, the MFA’s senior curator of contemporary art: “The beauty of a fleeting moment. Moonlight recalls lost love. The sun shimmering on water, the brevity of life.”



DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Lee Mingwei helped performer Teresa Winner Blume put on a costume.

The inspiration for “Sonic Blossom” came when Lee was home in Taiwan, taking care of his mother, who was ill with heart disease.

“When I was growing up, summers in Taiwan were hot, and I’d run around,” he said. “My mom would play Schubert at a low volume. I asked her to turn it up, and she’d say, ‘Be quiet and listen.’ She tricked me into being a quiet child.”

The artist played Schubert for his mother while she was in the hospital. When he was commissioned to create “Sonic Blossom,” Schubert was his soundtrack. He understands the composer’s magic, and created the trappings of the project — the costume, the chair, the rituals around the performance — as a conduit for that magic.

A tag sewn into the costume reads: “This cloak transforms the wearer into a magical being, bestowed with the power to give the gift of music.”

Singers usually sing into the dark of a theater. “On stage, we perform into the void,” said Blume. “We know it’s landing on faces and ears, but it’s different to hold one person’s gaze.”

Such a personal exchange can crack open social defenses. When Blume sang to Aidan Moroney, she was reminded of her own children, who are 7 and 9. But she kept the focus on Aidan — and on the song.

“His mother began sobbing, and he was just rapt and engaged and present,” said Blume. “I was moved. I felt the need to give the gift and not — if I broke down, I would take something away. When it was over, I was crying.”

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