

In Lee Mingwei's 'Sonic Blossom' at the Met, Schubert Is Intimate Installation Art

By JAMES R. OESTREICH NOV. 1, 2015

Ahead to the left on Friday morning was Yvonne Jacquette's painting "Little River Farm"; to the right, Chuck Close's "Lucas I," a portrait of the artist Lucas Samaras. Straight ahead, some dozen yards away, a young soprano, Beibei Guan, having politely inquired, "May I offer you the gift of a song?" and seated me in the lone chair, sang Schubert's "Nacht und Träume" ("Night and Dreams") directly to me.

Since this was an open gallery, the Blanche and A. L. Levine Court, in the modern and contemporary art area of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, we were not alone. A dozen or so others, appreciative or merely curious, gathered around to listen. But Ms. Guan's focus was so intense, her delivery so riveting, her singing so beautiful that those others, and the Jacquette and the Close, all faded from consciousness.

That is the gist of the current interactive performance installation "Sonic Blossom," conceived by the Taiwanese-born artist Lee Mingwei, formerly resident in New York, now in Paris. The spare physical elements — a chair; a delicate stand for the small speaker system placed behind the singer, replacing live piano; exotic cloaks for the vocalists — are all of Mr. Lee's design.

The 11 rotating singers are from the Manhattan School of Music except Ms. Guan, 27, who hails from Zhejiang in mainland China. Ms. Guan completed her master's studies at the Boston Conservatory and took part in the American premiere of "Sonic Blossom" at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston in March.

New Yorkers may recall Mr. Lee from previous installations, including "The Moving Garden" at the Brooklyn Museum in 2011. There each visitor was invited to pick a flower from a row lining a long granite table and, once back on the street, present it to a stranger.

Mr. Lee's current concerns, obviously, are with direct human contact, communication and giving, and in "Sonic Blossom," the contact is as direct as could be. The singers — two alternate in any given three-and-a-half-hour segment — circulate among the visitors in the gallery or neighboring ones and choose their marks not quite at random.

"The only thing I told them," Mr. Lee said in an interview, "was to use their hearts." The cloaks, he added, are meant to make the singers feel like demigods, bringing beauty into the world.

The singers choose from among five Schubert lieder. No texts, translations or explanations are provided, and since the typical museumgoer cannot be expected to understand German, be familiar with the individual songs or perhaps even know who Schubert was, it is just singer and listener, communing over a distance.

"I don't consider myself a performer," Ms. Guan said in an interview. "I'm a giver and receiver. I try to carry my heart through the space. It inspires me to pour my heart out."

Indeed she does, and I can attest that for an attentive listener the effect can be intense and powerful. I was reduced to tears after the performance and couldn't even compose myself to thank Ms. Guan properly.

This wasn't entirely surprising, since I do know something about Schubert and his songs, and the impact that the composer and his music have on me. And as — still blubbering — I told Mr. Lee, I've always been sentimental about many things, and since my open-heart surgery of four years ago, anything that moves me deeply can make me cry, leaving me embarrassed and unable to explain.



The installation "Sonic Blossom," by Lee Mingwei at the Met, has singers (at left, the soprano Margaret Newcomb) performing Schubert in a contemporary gallery. Julieta Cervantes for The New York Times

“That’s exactly how this piece came about,” Mr. Lee said, taking slight license. He talked of his music-loving mother, who, when he was a rambunctious child, would play recordings of Schubert songs to calm him down. More, she played them quietly, so he would have to concentrate to take them in.

He developed a lifelong taste for them, and when his mother had open-heart surgery three years ago in Taiwan he attended her recovery, playing for her the Schubert songs used here. Asked to create something for the inauguration of a branch of the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea, in Seoul, he replied that he would have to wait some months because of his mother’s operation, and it was during those months that “Sonic Blossom” came together in his mind.



The soprano Margaret Newcomb walks through the Blanche and A. M. L. Levine Court at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Julieta Cervantes for The New York Times

It would be nice to be able to report that everyone had a response to the work as deeply emotional as mine, and some seemed to. Others simply took it in stride — when aren’t you accosted in New York by strangers wanting to give you something? — and simply walked away, probably scratching their heads internally.

I heard only eight of the singers over two days, and the performance level, hardly the point of the exercise, varied.

“I want to work with students,” Mr. Lee said, “because there’s something not quite so perfect about their work. They’re humble, not thinking, ‘My work is so beautiful.’ They’re just giving it out.”

But one other singer must be singled out: Dominick Corbacio, a tenor, who gave one excellent performance after another of the sublime “Du Bist die Ruh” (“You Are the Calm”) on Saturday afternoon, almost too much of a good thing for us sentimentalists to bear.

“Sonic Blossom” has moved to the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in the Asian art area of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where it runs through Thursday, and will return to the Levine Court from Friday through Sunday. Metropolitan Museum of Art; 212-570-3949, metmuseum.org.

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