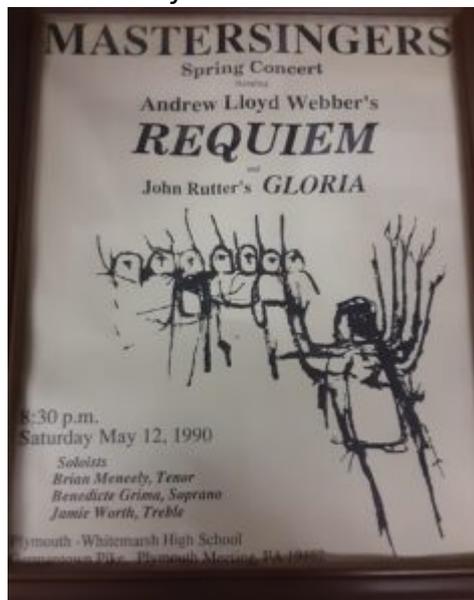


# Variations on a Theme: Precious Moments Found Through Singing

written by Guest Contributor | June 10, 2021



Throughout most of my life I have sung, mostly sacred music in choruses, and some opera. Singing has offered the opportunity to convert emotion into harmony, a warm, joyous energy. It is also an occasion to lose oneself in creating that harmony; no single voice stands out. There have been some magical moments in my life in which a brief but profound experience was had through music.

**I.**  
During my years as an undergraduate student, many people mistakenly took me for a music major. I was officially a writing major, but I sat in or audited most of the music courses, sang in the choir, took voice lessons and sang in the operas, wailed away in practice rooms, performed with small groups for workshops, and gained a reputation as a singer. I sang duets from Porgy and Bess with a blond boy from the south. That was really an experience! I sang Chaucer's Canterbury Tales with a flute and bass. And there were endless classical duets, with other voices as well as with an odd assortment of instruments. A dancer even asked me to improvise a vocal accompaniment to her graduation performance!

During my senior year, by which time my musical reputation was well established, one of the faculty, Dr. X, a highly regarded piano professor, invited me to come sing through a book of Cole Porter and George Gershwin songs. My ego caressed, I was thrilled at the thought that a highly esteemed faculty member deemed me good enough to want to play music with me, and warmly wallowed in imagining the possibility of performing these songs with him at the piano in bars and lounges. And then reality hit when after a few hours of singing at his house, he approached me sexually. A thundering bomb

of revulsion shattered me as I became aware of his oily fringe of long hair draped across his forehead, his eyes half closed in a grin behind large thick glasses, and his wet lips aimed at mine. In an instant he suddenly morphed from a grand idol into a hideous toad. The passion and romanticism of youth that emitted from my singing, along with the student easily impressed by her mentor, had been misinterpreted and used to flatter me into a sexual lure. I realized I was no more than the young girl asked to pose by the great artist. My ego had been flattered, charmed by the belief in equity. I bolted from the house feeling small and ashamed, and ever since then, whenever I hear a song of Cole Porter or George Gershwin, I am reminded of Dr. X.

## **II.**

In 1996 when I was doing my fieldwork in Pakistan, I maintained a modest home in Peshawar where I resided momentarily between field expeditions into rural areas. One of my connections there was Bruce, who managed a British NGO for medical personnel. He spoke fluent Dari, and we shared an education and appreciation of classical Persian poetry. I learned he was also a fine pianist, and he was thrilled to discover in me a singer of classical art songs. The then U.S. Consul resided in a fine home graced with a grand piano, and Bruce arranged for us to meet there and play together. In the dusty city of Peshawar, amid the bustle of our work and life among Afghan refugees, we managed to create an escape through our music. Bruce found respite from the war, while for me, it was a break from fieldwork in remote villages. We would escape from our worlds to meet in this very American decorated home with a piano, play and sing through books of Schubert, Brahms, and Beethoven art songs. It always seemed odd to me to create this classical European niche in the middle of our Muslim existence, but it was ultimately cathartic.

## **III.**

In 2018 I traveled to France to reconnect with my French family. I had sworn, when I divorced the husband who wanted nothing to do with my French connection or family, to do this at least once every five years. My mother had diligently maintained the cross-Atlantic ties alive, and I had benefited when I went to Paris as a student, finding myself with a free place to live and discovering a family to surround me. On this trip I took my husband, Paul, and my stepdaughter, Anna, and the three of us delighted in driving from Brugges across northern France, stopping in Normandy and Brittany to visit sites and stay with cousins.

One of our last stops was to see cousins in Sologne, in the Chateaux de la Loire area. It was an old family house in the woods, with a part converted to a "gite," or historic house for rent. We stayed a few days, witnessed the bawdiness and decorum of a local boar hunt in the woods, and toured through some local towns and villages. But on the last night of our visit, Elisabeth's sister, Blandine, and her children, came for dinner and the evening.

I had heard about Blandine for years but had never met her. My mother had

arranged for her to put up my niece years ago, and again for her to come help out my sister in Utah when she was recovering from surgery, bed-ridden with two toddler children. My first sight of her was as she came casually sauntering through the field on foot approaching her sister's house. She resembled a child, her simple dress swinging from side to side as it hugged her petite slim body, her dark straight hair lying flat against her head in a bob, short bangs hovering over a face whose smile radiated across the field to where I stood. I loved her at once.

And after a two-hour dinner lingered outside at a long table in the late summer light, and dishes put away in airy humor, we settled in the living room for an evening of family exchange and entertainment. Elisabeth, an accomplished piano player, assumed her position on the stool at the keyboard, while Blandine and I took ours standing behind and on either side of her, allowing a clear view of the sheet music. There were scores of old French songs, some familiar and others which I'd never heard. But they are quite distinct in their cadence and melody, and I could read along. Blandine's snapping fingers provided our metronome, exacting precision and exactitude, without which the French would never perform music. War songs, folk songs, some American Alleluias, even. We did it all, while the men and children sat talking idly by. In that shared musical moment I felt connected with my French side, the Buffet family of my mother's father, and it was warming.

#### **IV.**

As a result of my divorce, I kept a one-bedroom condo we had purchased as a first step in the process, taking turns to extricate ourselves from the house without affecting our children. After the divorce the condo began its life as a rental unit which just paid for itself while I held onto it in case any of my children should ever want or need it.

My last tenants were an elderly Korean couple who spoke not a word of English. They were networked with the Korean church and community and had found my condo through a Korean realtor. I greeted them the day they moved in, and helped them find the freight elevator, carry belongings up to the unit, and get settled. He immediately struck me as gaunt, terribly pale and fragile, while she impressed me with her smiling, friendly disposition.

About a year after they had been living there and I had replaced the fridge when it died, I decided it was time for a yearly landlord visit. I was pleasantly greeted by the elegance and cleanliness of the apartment. We sat in the living room, where Mrs. Min served tea in china cups and saucers, and attempted to make small polite conversation, although this was scant as the language barrier between us allowed for little but enthusiastic smiles and stock phrases of politeness. When we rose and moved to the desk to look at the thermostat, my eyes fell on a piano music score with Korean writing between the clefs. It had to be for piano and voice, so I asked, gesturing with my fingers and pointing to the paper, who played the piano.

Genuine smiles broke out from both of them, and Mr. Min began speaking agitatedly in Korean, motioning to an upright piano I had failed to notice in

the corner of the living room. I managed to understand from Mrs. Min that he played for their church, and that she sang. Of course, I asked to hear something, and announced that I, too, liked to sing. Before long, he was seated playing a piece with tones and intervals strange to my western trained ear, while she and I stood on either side and slightly behind him, singing along. I couldn't read the Korean, but I could read the notes, and la-lad along. After singing through the entire piece, we congratulated each other and laughed with joy. We had found a means to communicate and share and I transitioned in their eyes from mere landlord to friend.

---

*Music can hold enormous power in memories and experiences, transporting us instantly to an age, location, or person. What sonic joys, mysteries, disbelief, and clarity have you experienced? Identify songs of influence in your life and explore them like variations on a theme, melding syntax and song structure, recalling the seriousness or levity that accompanies. Whether it's an account of when a specific song first entered your life, the process of learning to play a song, teaching someone a song, experiencing the same song in different places as it weaves through your life, unbelievable radio timing, sharing songs with those in need, tracking the passing down of songs, creative song analysis, music as politics, etc, I am interested in those ineffable moments and welcoming submissions of your own variations on a theme, as drawn from your life's soundtrack. Please email submissions to [meganentropy@gmail.com](mailto:meganentropy@gmail.com) and keep an eye out for others' [Variations](#).*

*\*\*("song" is a broad phrase: could be a pop song, a traditional tune, a symphony, commercial jingles, a hummed lullaby, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade recorder class horror stories, etc)\*\**

---



Benedicte Grima from PA has published her research as an anthropologist in Afghanistan and Pakistan in a scholarly book, *The Performance of Emotion Among Paxtun Women*, followed by a collection of

fieldwork-based essays, *Secrets From the Field*, and a historical fiction novel, *Talk Till the Minutes Run Out: An Immigrant's Tale from 7-Eleven*. She has also just published a second historical fiction novel, *Heirlooms' Tale: A Family Story Told by its Treasures*. Currently, she is working on short stories and a memoir.