

THE MET WANTS TO SERENADE YOU — LITERALLY — WITH NEW MUSICAL EXHIBIT 'SONIC BLOSSOM'

BY SILAS VALENTINO

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Lee Mingwei's "Sonic Blossom"

Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

At the heart of Lee Mingwei's upcoming exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art is a simple offering: *May I give you the gift of song?* The question serves as an introduction to Lee's interactive "Sonic Blossom" project, which pairs museum visitors with a singer for a one-on-one serenade of a Franz Schubert *Lied* — the German word for "song" — that effectively challenges the restrictions on intimacy between strangers.

"Sonic Blossom" debuted in 2013 at Korea's National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art and has since appeared in Beijing, Tokyo, Taipei, and Boston. The inspiration came to Lee three and a half years ago as he cared for his mother while she recuperated from surgery. Recalling how, in his childhood, his mother had used a Schubert *Lied* to calm him down, Lee streamed her a *Lieder* collection on Spotify – and found that the operatic music provided similar comfort. Today his mother is doing extremely well, and she'll soon experience the exhibit for the first time. "She's waiting for the big one at the Met," Lee says.

Speaking to the *Voice* from his new home in Paris, Lee elaborates on the distinction between his project's origins and its current presentation.

"The big difference between what I did and the 'Sonic Blossom' project is that this is a gift between strangers," explains the Taiwanese-born artist. "So that adds a little bit more tension between the gesture of gift and also receiving the gift, because we usually do not receive gifts from strangers."

'You know it's going to be just for a fleeting second. It's heart-wrenchingly beautiful because it is so sudden and impermanent.'

Museum attendees are chosen at random; if they elect to accept, they're led into a nearby room, where they'll be seated before a singer dressed in a floral Japanese kimono and sash. The exchange lasts only a few minutes – its ephemerality is a pivotal aspect of "Sonic Blossom."

"This is almost like when you walk into a garden and suddenly a butterfly lands on your shoulder," Lee says.

"That moment is very delicate and beautiful. You know it's going to be just for a fleeting second because you don't know when that butterfly is going to leave. It's heart-wrenchingly beautiful because it is so sudden and impermanent."

Intent on using nonprofessional performers, Lee selected eleven singers from the Manhattan School of Music. "The voices of these students are not perfect yet," he says. "There's a sense of humbleness and imperfection that I found very beautiful."

"Sonic Blossom" had its U.S. debut last spring in Boston at the Museum of Fine Arts. Upon the installation's completion, the museum presented Lee with a collection of various stories compiled by the singers. Reading through these anecdotes, he discovered another feature entrained by the gifts.

"I think the overall experience for the singers had been transformative because most of them were not taught to sing to a single person; they're [used to] singing to this void that has 2,000 people," he says. "Now they're singing to one person and looking them in the eyes. At first, the singer thought, 'OK, I'm giving this person a gift,' but very quickly they realized the gift is coming back to them from the receiver. The receivers were so emotional that often they broke down in tears within just a few seconds after the singer started. The singer realized that this is such a great gift in the sense of enlightenment – their voice could move them in a way they never could imagine."

Of course, that all hinges on the receptiveness of the listener in the first place. Lee notes that across the four venues in Asia, only twice was the "gift" declined, whereas in Boston, museum patrons chose to opt out ten to fifteen times a day.

"I don't know if it's a cultural difference," he says. "Maybe Asians, even if they don't want it, are embarrassed to say no. But when people went to MFA, most of the visitors [were] not

expecting to encounter a living contemporary art.

"We'll see at the Met what happens."

"Sonic Blossom" will run October 30–November 8 in the Blanche and A.L. Levine Court and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery at the Museum of Metropolitan Art. For more information, click [here](#).

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