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06.05.23  
04.06.23

Ongoing  
participatory  
performance

[matorino.it](http://matorino.it)

ENG

Lee Mingwei.  
*Sonic Blossom*

06.05.23  
04.06.23

**MAO Museo d'Arte Orientale**

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10122 Torino - Italia

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# *Sonic Blossom*

by Lee Mingwei

*Sonic Blossom* came into existence while I was caring for my mother as she recuperated from surgery. We found great comfort in listening to Franz Schubert's *Lieder*. These songs came as an unexpected gift to us, one that soothed us both and clearly helped with her healing. At another level, seeing my own mother weak and ill made her (and my) mortality suddenly very real; aging, disease and death were no longer abstractions to me, but immediate and present. One day she – and I – will be gone. Like Schubert's *Lieder*, our own lives are

brief, but all the more beautiful because of this. In this project created for the inaugural exhibition of National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea, I use these songs as a transformative gift to the visitors who encounter these moving *Lieder*. Each singer has to learn three of the five chosen *Lieder*. During exhibition hours, the singer meanders in the gallery, finding a visitor that s/he thinks might enjoy receiving this sonic gift by approaching them with the question: "May I give you a song?". This is when the song is sung. This happens sporadically both in time and location – the folding and unfolding of a "Sonic Blossom".

# Sonic Blossom, as Radical as an Unexpected Caress

by Davide Quadrio

*Nulla come l'ascolto, il vero ascolto, ci può far capire la correlazione fra silenzio e parola. È l'analogo della musica. La si ascolta pienamente quando tutto tace intorno a noi e dentro di noi.<sup>1</sup>*

My first meeting with Lee Mingwei took place about a decade ago, first with one of his works in Taipei, then in person in Shanghai. Immediately an elective affinity developed between us: we would work together but in a timeless projection, without an instant need. The chance occurs now, more than

1. Giovanni Pozzi, *Tacet*, Adelphi, Milano 2013, p.20. [Trad.: *Nothing like listening, real listening, can make us understand the correlation between silence and words. It is the analogue of music. We listen fully when everything is silent around us and within us*].

ten years later, with a fruitful combination of spaces, insights and collaborators.

*Sonic Blossom* stands as the defining work at the culmination of the curatorial project dedicated to “emptiness” that MAO has been undertaking for about a year now, flowing into the current exhibition *Buddha*<sup>10</sup>.

A year of gifts and images. A year of learning. Never before had my life in Asia seemed so far, far away. And so *Sonic Blossom* brings back to the centre of everyone’s journey the gift of listening, of relationship, of simple love. Somewhat prophetic, certainly human, poignantly human, Lee Mingwei’s project creeps between the museum and you, the privileged audience. A Lied played and sung “just for you”, in an intimate and almost private tone, thus becomes the occasion for a unique experience.

*Sonic Blossom* brings to life an exhibition of vibrations and not objects, animated by the singers and the viewers who actively take part in it. An exhibition where music, at the heart of this interacting process, turns into a disclosed gift.

A year of work at MAO carried out by the people who also exquisitely contributed to the realisation of *Sonic Blossom*: from musicologist Erik Battaglia, carried within an unexpected Schubertian dimension, to the Conservatorio di Torino and its singers, from Chiara Lee and Freddie Murphy as alchemists to “Yizhong” (Vincenzo Di Federico and Lanxin Zheng) protectors of the gestures to be performed, up to Lee Mingwei, an ever-present yet evanescent artist.

His story, your story.

A delicate and sharp work.

As radical as an unexpected caress.

# Schubert's Lieder in Lee Mingwei's Harmonic Garden

by Erik Battaglia

At first glance (but not at first listening), one might think the juxtaposition of Lieder by Schubert and a participatory installation at the MAO to be a sort of dystopian reality, or at least a *u-topic* one (which is a bit like saying “out of place”). Instead the two worlds become one, thanks to the creative and compositional imagination of a global artist like Lee Mingwei, a *Lied Mingled Way-up* in Art's empyrean, as it were. Moreover, the Lied is the form *par excellence* of elective affinity: between poetry and music, between singer and pianist, between

performer and audience, the latter here fragmented and reassembled as a single among the multiplicity. And Franz Schubert embodies *ante-litteram* the figure of the universal genius, of the cosmopolitan artist, one of the first European artists for sure. This is all the more noteworthy (and notes-worthy, and Words-Worth so to speak) considering that the poor composer almost never travelled, he was sedentary in his Vienna perhaps crossed by other cultural tremors thanks to the Congress of 1814-5, but still an apparently restricted reality and local. Yet he was able to see and feel the poetic and human message in universal literature: he could understand Goethe's *Faust* (still in progress those years) and *Gretchen's psychosis* at just 17; and then Heine's poetry of estrangement, just published; the timeless one by Petrarch and that of Goethe's contemporary *West-Eastern Divan*, the first great warning to humanity on the need for understanding between the two worlds and the promise of their union in peace and art.

All of this resounds in the memory evoked by Lee Mingwei's project, in those *Songs my Mother Taught me*, some songs by Schubert's that his mother used to play for him, perhaps from one of the legendary LPs by Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, the prophet of the Lied, as a form of redemption for humanity after the darkness of the Second War. Those Lieder, thanks to this project, continue to resonate like music from the womb of mother earth, our “Frau Welt”, as Hermann Hesse would have said. And the marvelous halls of the MAO are a simulacrum of truth and beauty just like a mother's womb.

The interpreters will have to look more than ever for the expressive unity between the words they say and think, music, and their outcome in the sound-blossom of their own voice, like in the title of the

project and in thousand other songs about Nature's flowering and the world's reflowerish after long winters of the soul and of our discontent.

The public will receive that gift of music and words as a personal gift, each of them a potential and temporary *primo inter pares* who will also be aside while facing so much beauty, while recomposing it in his/her own listening ability. And this is what Schubert and Lee Mingwei did with their singing (just to quote Heine and his *Loreley* as an emblem of Lieder's power).

# A Conversation between Lee Mingwei, Chiara Lee and Freddie Murphy

**FM:** As sound artists and curators of the music public programme at the museum, we'd love starting this conversation by asking: what is your relationship with music?

**LM:** I actually went to one of the best Conservatory schools for young children in Taiwan. It's a Catholic school called Guangren and it is very well known for preparing children in Western classical music. I went into that school when I was first grade and then continued until fifth grade. I studied violin, therefore I grew up with music from Bach, Brahms, Beethoven... all occidental musicians, nothing of Chinese or East Asian classical music at all. In fact, since the training system was Catholic, occidental, somehow the idea of playing an instrument from the east, from Taiwan,

Japan, China or Vietnam was considered second-class. Strange enough, the mentality at the time in the 60s was that anything from the west was great, starting from democracy to Catholicism to Bach and Beethoven's music.

So music to me is one of the fundamental elements in my household and also in my personal life just because I was trained to be a violinist, I took classes like history of Western classical music, theory, rhythm, so it is a very important part of my growing up.

**FM: Does music influence your pace as an artist then? And if so how?**

**LM:** Yes, in two different ways. The most important way is that I often listen to Bach and Chopin and not as much Beethoven, but Brahms and Liszt, and Schumann, not when I'm creating things but to go to a sort of mental and emotional place, to be completely imbued in this beauty, in the idea of beauty, therefore I could be creative. So that is very much within my practice.

And there are three projects in my repertoire that have a very clear component of Western music, mostly because there's a music component to it.

**CL: *Sonic Blossom* has a really cathartic element to it, what's your most cathartic experience related to music?**

**LM:** I remember the most powerful experience as an artist. I was travelling on a night train again – I love to travel by train and at night – I was between Berlin and at the time I was going to Munich to visit my friend. I had a project coming up at the Museum of Contemporary Art Taipei, so this

was 2006, and that new project I was creating was completely out of my control: the show was opening in two weeks and I felt that work was just not my work, basically it was something I did not want to put my name on. So, on the train I was listening to Bach – *The unaccompanied cello suites* – and suddenly I realized I wanted to do a piece that was inspired not by Bach but by Dvořák's "American quartet", so that's when this project called *The Quartet Project* came about.

Looking back now it's interesting for me that it was Bach who allowed me the courage to abandon the original idea and, in a way, invited me to create a complete open space to create something new, not from his work but from somebody else's work, Dvořák.

**FM: I think it's always great when something like that happens, you know, like if you are in a crossroad and you don't know which way to go and suddenly someone pops up out of nowhere, and this person, or entity, is empathetic, or you perceive it as empathetic, so you may listen to its suggestions.**

**LM:** Completely, yes, I mean physically he was very dead but in that moment he was so alive.

**FM: It's like abandoning yourself to the suggestion, to a possible different path. I think it is 100% still your will, your decision, your idea, everything is still you, but...**

**LM:** Yes, I also think it is a magical moment, I mean, my spirit, or anyone's, is in conversation with another spirit that lived far away and in a very

different space and time but they are really within one of each other. That was really quite a mythical and magical moment.

**FM:** This brings me to the following question, that is about the rituality that we find essential in *Sonic Blossom*. Would you like to tell us what is your take on rituality and do you also feel that it has an important role in this work?

**LM:** Ritual is a very important part of all my work. It sets the boundary between a quotidian action such as sleeping, singing, dancing, eating, apart from the work I am on to do in the museum. So ritual in *Sonic Blossom* particularly is where the tension lives and tension again is a very important part of my work that sets apart from everyday activity. That's why in *Sonic Blossom* the singer wears a highly signifying costume, because it is that costume that gives this person the power to be a demigod, to transform the singer into something bigger than life and it is the ritual part that allows and invites them to go out and to create a magical moment. So we got that ritual of putting on a gown, walking very slowly and posing that important question of: "May I give you something?". In this case a song, and that question is the key to open up this ritual. That question opens a spiritual and emotional door, for these two people to encounter each other, and once this experience is over, this door starts closing and closing and closing and there is a moment that it breaks and parts each other, but that moment depends on who these two people are, and sometimes the experience continue for months, even if these two people don't see each other, so it is quite beautiful and I, as the creator of

this work, have no control over this very ephemeral filament, which is up to these two strangers.

**FM:** I've not experienced *Sonic Blossom* live yet, but I have the feeling that it can really change the people involved, both the singers and the audience. I think in a way this already happened after we auditioned the students from the Conservatory together. You know, when we invited them to the museum to sing in the Mazzonis hall, the gallery where they will give the gift of songs to the audience... they were already a bit transformed, already feeling themselves as part of this collective ritual.

**LM:** It really is quite moving to see the transformation literally in front of your eyes, and we'll witness this again from the first day of *Sonic Blossom* onward and it continues, continues, continues. Every day you see the transformation. It really is very powerful.

**CL:** I feel that another key theme in *Sonic Blossom* and other works of yours is trust. The fact for example that if the chosen person in the audience does not trust the singer, nothing happens, really strikes me, so for me it is really about trusting the others and opening up to them. What is trust for you and why is it so important in your work?

**LM:** I think it is a very important thing, hopefully not only in my work, between human and human, but



even between humans and animals.

I think trust is a foundation to build everything and for example with *Sonic Blossom* when you mention that someone refuses the gift, I think there could be multiple things going on. One, of course, is like you said there is a lack of trust because when you receive a gift even from a stranger you need to trust that this gift is a beautiful one and not a gift that is going to hurt you, right? There could be another thing going on, let's say these people don't want to expose themselves to the public or do not have time or, you know, all different kinds of reasons, but definitely what you mentioned, lacking of trust, could be one of them.

**FM: Also, *Sonic Blossom* is your work, but you entrust someone else to envision it with you and perform on it and this also says a lot about the power that this project has and the link, the bond that it can create.**

**LM:** Yes, I think when I put trust out to the singers, to yourself and to Davide Quadrio, his team and to the Conservatory it really gives power to each of you, as well as a responsibility that we share in this together. Once the project is understood then it becomes much richer because I personally can't take on all these things, first of all I don't sing and second of all, you know, there are many, many things I can't and I don't want to do. So trust is a way of sharing the responsibility and is a way of ensuring each of these kinds of projects succeed and becomes a part embedded in the community that is taking care of that.

**CL: And what about gift giving, another main theme of *Sonic Blossom*? One aspect of it is that**

**you obviously give a gift to the audience but I'm sure it is a two ways process, so what is the gift that you receive back?**

**LM:** Oh, there are just so many things. First of all, I get to enjoy the beauty of the music. Second of all, I get to encounter these amazing young talented singers who are at the beginning of their career and then later on after they did *Sonic Blossom* they would come back to me a year or two or three years later and saying, you know: "the experience of *Sonic Blossom* really opened up a different part of me". So this is absolutely something I can't plan and something I only can find myself feeling very lucky when I encounter those moments. Especially at the audition there is nothing more beautiful than when a singer just sings to you and they sing from the bottom of their hearts, and that is already enough reward for me to continue doing this type of work.

**CL: Yes, I agree, it was quite magical when we auditioned those young singers.**

**LM:** You know, on a side note, remember when we asked the singers to sing something from their hearts and one of them sang a melody from *Madame Butterfly* that his parents used to sing to him and then another singer also sang something that her mother sang to her? That was so beautiful. So I was just in Hong Kong where there's this new museum called M+ and they want to commission me a new work and I started talking about this experience and suddenly I just said I'm going to create a new work that is based on lullabies, the songs that mothers sing to their children. The details I'm still not sure yet, but I know that because

of our experience at the Conservatory in Turin this will continue into a very different work.

**CL: Beautiful. Yes, I feel there are always so many unexpected things happening during *Sonic Blossom*, both during the preparation and the performance itself. Would you like to share some stories about something that unexpectedly happened in the past with us?**

**LM:** Yes, whenever an institution hosts *Sonic Blossom* there are always these very, very moving and surprisingly beautiful, sometimes very sad stories that come out from the receiver, who often would tell the singers because often they are in tears and sobbing and they feel they should share their emotions with the singers who triggered all these tears and emotions.

So, one of them happened at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia (MCA) in 2016. The curator got a call from the guard in the gallery saying: "You must come down now. It's urgent". She was in the middle of a meeting and she thought: "Oh my god! Somebody must have smashed a painting or did something horrible". She went down there and she thought she would hear people singing because that was the gallery where *Sonic Blossom* was but it was dead silent, so she went in there and everybody was in tears crying. Basically, what happened was that, and I mean visually it must have been quite a stunning scene, but what happened was that the singer went up to an elderly gentleman that was in a group of persons with disabilities and said: "May I give you a gift of song?" and this gentleman came over in a walker, sat down and the singer started singing.

And on the middle of that he started tearing up and crying, which is not unusual, and afterward he got up and said: "Thank you so much, it was such a beautiful, beautiful gift and I want you to know that I was an opera singer but because of a stroke I lost not only the ability to walk, but also to sing for the last ten years. I'm not able to sing anymore." That was already very, very moving and then a few minutes later when he walked out of the gallery where they were all standing he started singing the same Lied that he received from the singer in this amazing, powerful voice, and that's when everybody started crying. This shows you that our brain is so flexible, something triggered, bringing back the muscle, you know singing is a very muscular thing, a body thing... hearing that Lied triggered the body and the muscle relaxed in such a way that it could vibrate, and he could sing again. For me it was so beautiful and touching to hear this story.

**FM: Again, it's such a cathartic moment.**

**LM:** Exactly, and like I say, at MAO there are going to be these kinds of stories, equally moving.

**FM: I'm thinking now that the moments that I felt the most magical in my life involved singing or listening to someone singing.**

**CL: Yes, it is really powerful and cathartic when you find that connection with the voice, much more than with an instrument I think, probably because it is human but sometimes you get literally run over by it.**

**LM:** I completely agree, because the muscle is an instrument but it's a part of the body, which it's amazing and like you said, it's so powerful, much more than another instrument that is outside of your body.



# Franz Schubert's Lieder

## DE **An den Mond (Hölty)**

Geuß, lieber Mond, geuß deine Silberflimmer  
Durch dieses Buchengrün,  
Wo Phantasien und Traumgestalten immer  
Vor mir vorüberfliehn!

Enthülle dich, daß ich die Stätte finde,  
Wo oft mein Mädchen saß,  
Und oft, im Wehn des Buchbaums und der Linde,  
Der goldnen Stadt vergaß!

Enthülle dich, daß ich des Strauchs mich freue,  
Der Kühlung ihr gerauscht,  
Und einen Kranz auf jeden Anger streue,  
Wo sie den Bach belauscht!

Dann, lieber Mond, dann nimm den Schleier wieder,  
Und traur' um deinen Freund,  
Und weine durch den Wolkenflor hernieder,  
Wie ein Verlaßner weint!

## **Auf dem Wasser zu singen (Stolberg)**

Mitten im Schimmer der spiegelnden Wellen  
Gleitet, wie Schwäne, der wankende Kahn:  
Ach, auf der Freude sanftschimmernden Wellen  
Gleitet die Seele dahin wie der Kahn;  
Denn von dem Himmel herab auf die Wellen

---

*An den Mond* (Hölty); 1815, op. 57 n. 3 (D193)  
*Auf dem Wasser zu singen* (Graf zu Stolberg); 1823, op. 72 (D774)  
*Du bist die Ruh* (Rückert); 1823, op. 59 n. 3 (D776)  
*Frühlingsglaube* (Uhland); 1820, op. 20 n. 2 (D686)  
*Nacht und Träume* (von Collin); 1820, op. 20 n. 2 (D686)

Translated by © Richard Wigmore

## EN **An den Mond – To The Moon**

Beloved moon, shed your silver radiance  
through these green beeches,  
where fancies and dreamlike images  
forever flit before me.

Unveil yourself, that I may find the spot  
where my beloved sat, where often,  
in the swaying branches of the beech and lime,  
she forgot the gilded town.

Unveil yourself, that I may delight in the whispering  
bushes that cooled her,  
and lay a wreath on that meadow  
where she listened to the brook.

Then, beloved moon, take your veil once more,  
and mourn for your friend.  
Weep down through the hazy clouds,  
as the one you have forsaken weeps.

## **In the Middle of the Shimmer of the Reflecting Waves**

Amid the shimmer of the mirroring waves  
the rocking boat glides, swan-like;  
on gently shimmering waves of joy  
the soul, too, glides like a boat.  
For from the sky the setting sun

DE Tanzet das Abendrot rund um den Kahn.  
Über den Wipfeln des westlichen Haines  
Winket uns freundlich der rötliche Schein;  
Unter den Zweigen des östlichen Haines  
Säuselt der Kalmus im rötlichen Schein;  
Freude des Himmels und Ruhe des Haines  
Atmet die Seel im errötenden Schein.

Ach, es entschwindet mit tauigem Flügel  
Mir auf den wiegenden Wellen die Zeit;  
Morgen entschwinde mit schimmerndem Flügel  
Wieder wie gestern und heute die Zeit,  
Bis ich auf höherem strahlendem Flügel  
Selber entschwinde der wechselnden Zeit.

### **Du bist die Ruh (Rückert)**

Du bist die Ruh,  
Der Friede mild,  
Die Sehnsucht du  
Und was sie stillt.

Ich weihe dir  
Voll Lust und Schmerz  
Zur Wohnung hier  
Mein Aug und Herz.

Kehr ein bei mir,  
Und schließe du  
Still hinter dir  
Die Pforten zu.

Treib andern Schmerz  
Aus dieser Brust!  
Voll sei dies Herz  
Von deiner Lust.

Dies Augenzelt  
Von deinem Glanz  
Allein erhellt,  
O füll es ganz!

EN dances upon the waves around the boat.  
Above the treetops of the western grove  
the red glow beckons kindly to us;  
beneath the branches of the eastern grove  
the reeds whisper in the red glow.  
The soul breathes the joy of heaven,  
the peace of the grove, in the reddening glow.

Alas, with dewy wings  
time vanishes from me on the rocking waves.  
Tomorrow let time again vanish with shimmering  
wings, as it did yesterday and today,  
until, on higher, more radiant wings,  
I myself vanish from the flux of time.

### **You are Peace, the Mild Peace**

You are repose  
and gentle peace.  
You are longing  
and what stills it.

Full of joy and grief  
I consecrate to you  
my eyes and my heart  
as a dwelling place.

Come in to me  
and softly close  
the gate  
behind you.

Drive all other grief  
from my breast.  
Let my heart  
be full of your joy.

The temple of my eyes  
is lit  
by your radiance alone:  
O, fill it wholly!

DE

### Frühlingsglaube (Uhland)

Die linden Lüfte sind erwacht,  
Sie säuseln und weben Tag und Nacht,  
Sie schaffen an allen Enden.  
O frischer Duft, o neuer Klang!  
Nun, armes Herze, sei nicht bang!  
Nun muß sich alles, alles wenden.

Die Welt wird schöner mit jedem Tag,  
Man weiß nicht, was noch werden mag,  
Das Blühen will nicht enden;  
Es blüht das fernste, tiefste Tal:  
Nun, armes Herz, vergiß der Qual!  
Nun muß sich alles, alles wenden.

### Nacht und Träume (Collin)

Heil'ge Nacht, du sinkest nieder;  
Nieder wallen auch die Träume  
Wie dein Mondlicht durch die Räume,  
Durch der Menschen stille Brust.

Die belauschen sie mit Lust;  
Rufen, wenn der Tag erwacht:  
Kehre wieder, heil'ge Nacht!  
Holde Träume, kehret wieder!

EN

### Spring Faith

Balmy breezes are awakened;  
they stir and whisper day and night,  
everywhere creative.  
O fresh scents, O new sounds!  
Now, poor heart, do not be afraid.  
Now all must change.

The world grows fairer each day;  
we cannot know what is still to come;  
the flowering knows no end.  
The deepest, most distant valley is in flower.  
Now, poor heart, forget your torment.  
Now all must change.

### Night and Dreams

Holy night, you sink down;  
dreams, too, float down,  
like your moonlight through space,  
through the silent hearts of men.

They listen with delight,  
crying out when day awakes:  
come back, holy night!  
Fair dreams, return!



# Biography

## Lee Mingwei (Taiwan, 1964)

Born in Taiwan and currently living in New York and Paris, Lee Mingwei creates participatory installations, where strangers can explore issues of trust, intimacy, and self-awareness, and one-on-one events, in which visitors contemplate these issues with the artist through eating, sleeping, walking and conversation. Lee's projects are often open-ended scenarios for everyday interaction and take on different forms with participants' involvement and change during an exhibition.

He has held solo exhibitions internationally, including Tate Modern, Centre Pompidou, Gropius Bau, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Mori Art Museum, and has been featured in Biennales in Venice, Lyon, Liverpool, Taipei, Shanghai, Sharjah, Sydney, Whitney, and Asia Pacific Triennials.

# Programme and Timetable of the Performance

From May 6<sup>th</sup> to June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2023,  
*Sonic Blossom* will be performed at  
MAO in the Mazzonis hall, creating a  
dialogue with the museum visitors,  
the works in the permanent collection,  
and the temporary exhibition *Buddha*<sup>10</sup>.  
*A fragmented display on Buddhist  
visual evolution.*

Selected and trained by Lee Mingwei in  
collaboration with music professor Erik Battaglia,  
eight singers, including Alessia Schumacher (Berlin)  
and seven Lieder singers from the Conservatorio  
"Giuseppe Verdi", will switch off in the museum's  
galleries for five weeks.

The singers will choose one visitor from among  
all those present and offer him or her a gift a  
Lied by Schubert, songs from the European  
classical repertory. If the visitor accepts the gift,  
he or she will be guided to the Mazzonis hall and  
the performance will begin.

The performances depend on visitor  
participation and will be held Tuesday,  
Wednesday, and Thursday from 3 to 5  
PM; Friday, Saturday, and Sunday from  
11 AM to 1 PM and from 3 to 5 PM.

Another evening recital will be held  
on June 1<sup>st</sup> in the gardens of Villa della  
Regina, for the exhibition's finissage.



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