

Dying, she wants to hear Bach

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Friends arrange a joyous visit to Lincoln Center for 'Passion'

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Dai Dai held tickets for a March 5 concert at Lincoln Center that sold out a year ahead.

A Bach enthusiast, Dai (her first as well as her last name), 45, an artist and fabric designer who came to the United States from Shanghai 10 years ago, usually attended two concerts every year to hear works by Bach, Vivaldi and Wagner.

She had two orchestra seats for the "St. Matthew Passion".

Philippe Herreweghe is her favorite conductor, and Dai had looked forward to the concert with a lot of excitement.

But serious illness intervened.

In 2001, the Elmhurst resident was diagnosed with breast cancer. But she obtained a second opinion and was erroneously told she had rheumatoid arthritis. Since she did not get treated for cancer, the disease spread.

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A mastectomy

Last year, Dai had a mastectomy and underwent chemotherapy. She became a patient of the Visiting Nurse Service. Then about five weeks ago, she was admitted to the hospice unit at the Margaret Tietz Nursing and Rehabilitation Center in Jamaica, her hopes of enjoying the Bach concert dashed.

Enter Ellie Cantor, 64, of Bayside, a retired elementary school teacher who works part-time in the center's holistic program, and her dog, Max, a registered volunteer who "sings" on command.

Cantor visits her mother, a resident at the center. She often takes Max, a Chihuahua she rescued from a shelter, on rounds, to cheer residents. She learned that Dai liked dogs and took Max to visit in February.

Finding a friend

Pet and patient bonded right away, and Cantor became Dai's confidante. She learned that Dai was divorced; that friends and former co-workers often visited her; that Dai's mother - whose picture is on a table in her room alongside pictures of her cats - was "in heaven already," as were the cats; that her father and a younger brother are in Shanghai and that they knew of her illness but not its severity. "I don't want them to see me like this. I was so healthy before," Dai told visitors on March 5, the day of the Herreweghe performance.

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"It was her wish to go to the concert" - part of Lincoln Center's Great Performance series - Cantor said. "At first she wanted to give me the tickets. I said I couldn't."

But Dai still hoped she could attend. "She wanted to know if there was any way the center could make it happen," Cantor said.

Linda Speigel, the center's spokeswoman, took on the challenge. She made arrangements with Alice Tully Hall, an ambulance and a taxi service.

Alice Tully Hall's house manager, Harry Eagle, had eight seats removed from a first- floor box to accommodate a special wheelchair for Dai.

Hunter Ambulance of Inwood reduced the cost of ambulance service from \$1,500 to \$200 to transport Dai to the show on a stretcher. Kenneth Brown, the center's chief executive, authorized use of donations to the hospice to cover the cost.

Century Car Service of Bayside agreed to carry the wheelchair and Cantor, who went as Dai's guest. A nursing assistant from the center would ride with Dai in the ambulance. The ambulance and car would wait to take them back to the hospice.

Heart-wrenching story

"It was a really heart-wrenching story," said Century Car Service's vice president Frank Leo- grand. Wayne Rosner, vice-president of operations for Hunter Ambulance, said Dai was a "very courageous

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lady. It was a pleasure to make it happen for her."

Lincoln Center spokeswoman Marian Skokan said arrangements were made under its program for people with disabilities. "Lincoln Center feels very strongly that music is for everyone," she said. "Most of the time it isn't as dramatic as this. This was a very exceptional case."

Dai was overjoyed. "I'm very excited about this," she said before the concert. "I'm looking forward to listening. It might be my last concert. If I can listen to this concert, I will be satisfied with no regrets. That's why I appreciate Margaret Tietz and all the people here. They really try their best to make patients feel good, comfortable, feel warm; everything they can do."

Spiegel said the arrangements "went like clockwork."

Dai also had another wish fulfilled - thanks to Eagle - to have Herreweghe autograph one of his CDs that she owns.

She wanted to stay until the end of the three-hour concert but tired at about 10:30 p.m. and was taken back to the hospice.

"She said she had the time of her life," Spiegel said the next day. "She had a big smile on her face. She said, 'I can't even tell you how special it was. It's just the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me.' "

Conducted by Herreweghe, the Collegium Vocale Gent chorus which sang the three-hour oratorio, based on the Gospel of St. Matthew, is considered one of the best in the world, according to Skokan.

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A love of Bach

Before the concert, Dai had explained her interest in Bach's compositions. "His music almost equals my religion - Christian," she said. "He has 200 cantatas, all from the Bible. If I listen to his cantatas, read the Bible and learn and study, I can understand God. I hope you all get a chance to listen to his music someday."

Newsday's classical music reviewer, Justin Davidson, described Herreweghe's chorus as "extraordinary" and wrote that the conductor "led an exquisite collective performance." He cited Herreweghe as having "set the standards for Bach performance in our time."

A cheerful, smiling woman, Dai stoically takes her condition in stride. "Death is a product of nature," she said. "I have no complaints at all. Even in facing my ending, I can enjoy something. I can feel something from the environment and from people."

She described the staff at Margaret Tietz as "the best."

Dai has been working on a pencil sketch of Max as a gift for Cantor, who spoke glowingly of Dai's courage and her "ability to appreciate every day."

"A part of me will die when she dies," Cantor said, "but I will celebrate her life."

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