

*Ubiquity: The Journal of Literature, Literacy, and the Arts, Creative Works Strand*, Vol. 5 No. 1, Spring/Summer 2018, pp. 13-15 *Ubiquity*: <http://ed-ubiquity.gsu.edu/wordpress/>  
ISSN: 2379-3007

## **Hands-on Learning**

© *Sheryl A. Lain*

When I stepped into Mrs. Dimerski's house, I entered a foreign land. Her drapes, deep red peonies blooming against dark green, subdued the bright Wyoming light. Outside, the piercingly clear sunshine flattened the surfaces of streets and fields and barns, but inside, perpetual twilight softened Mrs. Dimerski's living room. The dominant piece of furniture was the piano. It glowed, lamplight haloing the pages of music above the keyboard.

My mother hired Mrs. Dimerski to give me voice lessons. On Saturday morning at nine, Mom dropped me off at 106 South Evans Street. I'd walk up the sidewalk separating the two halves of the front lawn, straight as the part down the middle of my hair, to the small green house. I tapped on the door—a hushed tapping, and Mrs. Dimerski, a blonde Amazon of a woman with a presence large enough to command the cavernous stage of the Metropolitan Opera, opened the door and admitted me to her world.

A 50's girl, I never dreamed of asking her why she and her husband moved from New York City to Wyoming, the least populated state in the Union. Asking her would be a breach of etiquette unheard of in that more formal time. But, Mom learned that Mrs. Dimerski sang in the Met before she married. Her husband brought her to our farmland where Handel's *Messiah* was the highest form of musical expression we knew.

Every Saturday, Mrs. Dimerski taught me to sing—one piece of music after another. Arias in Italian, in German. She taught me how to control my breath, how to shape the precise sound of each vowel with my mouth and lips. I studied like a religious zealot. Her deep loyalty to the music demanded my discipline. I even quit cheerleading at football games, a highly-valued, Friday night ritual in my hometown. Shouting, “*Defense, Panthers, defense!*” scraped my vocal chords raw and ruined my Saturday morning voice lesson. I quit cheerleading, sacrificing this small-town American norm on the elevated altar of her music.

We never hugged, we never even shook hands, but I touched Mrs. Dimerski once. She was trying to teach me to place the high F and the high C in my facial mask. It’s a strange concept and I didn’t get it. So, she took up my hand and held the tender pads of my three middle fingers against her own face while she sang, modeling for me. My fingers, placed at the top of her cheekbones under her eyes, felt the resonance of the high F. Then to feel the high C, she moved my fingers to her forehead, just above the arch of her eyebrows. Through my fingers’ knowledge, my voice learned where to put the sounds, and I sang. She listened, nodded, and moved on with the lesson, accompanying me singing Mimi’s *Il Baccio* from Puccini’s opera, *La Boheme*.

I took voice lessons from Mrs. Dimerski for eighteen months. Then one Saturday morning, I drove to Mrs. Dimerski’s quiet house and walked up the straight sidewalk, to her front door, curtains pulled shut as usual. She did not answer my tap, my double rap, my louder knock. I stood a long time before realization dawned. She was gone. I walked all the way around the outside of the house and knew. She was really gone.

It turned out that she had told Mom they'd be moving to Billings, a small city, where her husband got a better job and she had a larger stage for her voice. Mom had tried to tell me, but my literal mind couldn't hear her oblique message--"Mrs. Dimerski will be singing with the Billings Symphony Choir and Orchestra." or "Mrs. Dimerski auditioned and won a spot on the Rocky Mountain Opera Touring Company housed in Billings." Mrs. Dimerski tried to tell me, too. For several weeks she'd been giving me her personal copies of the music I'd learned and vinyl records of *Tosca* and my beloved *La Boheme*. They had told me, but I couldn't hear.

That Saturday on Mrs. Dimerski's front porch, I realized that my music teacher was a bright meteor that passed through my sheltered world, not a permanent star. I didn't cry, but I never forgot the woman who taught me how to learn through touch, how to feel the resonance of my heart.