Wok & Roll

Peter Kwong

**Music breaks down language barriers**

I love singing; or I should say, I just love music. Strange enough, even if I don’t speak the language, I can pick up the tune and just sing along with my heart.

I love to sing in the shower; the acoustics are the best. While I am having the best time singing Pavarotti at the top of my lungs, I always hear a knock on the door.

Of course, it is my wife (I hope, and not our neighbors). “Honey, can you tone it down a bit, you are scaring the cats.”

There are more ways that I would like to scare the cats, but to keep peace in the family, I abide with a smile. Humming Pavarotti ain’t the same. How can one hum “Nessun Dorma?”

Growing up in Hong Kong, we lived in the crossroads of different cultures. There would be songs in Cantonese, Mandarin, Spanish, Italian, French … you name it. I didn’t know what the titles of the songs meant, but I just loved singing along.

So, “O Sole Mio,” “Besame Mucho,” no problems at all. One time I heard “Hava Nagila” on the radio and I just learned to sing along.

Little did I know that it is a traditional joyous Jewish song that folks would sing at weddings and other special occasions. I happen to have many Jewish friends; can you imagine the faces of the guests watching a Chinese guy singing a Yiddish song? They went nuts!

Then I picked up guitar playing. We used to live in apartments that were 15 feet by 20 feet, right next to each other. You could hear your neighbors talking to each other at times.

Still, it was better than sharing a 1,500-square-foot. flat with nine other families while I was growing up. Ah, the good old days.

While I was practicing my chords on my guitar, I believed it was bearable. Then when I started to sing, I could hear windows slamming. At least they gave me faces and didn’t tell me to be quiet.

For some strange reasons, one of my father’s business associates was moving and he had a bunch of old records that he wanted to get rid of. Wanting to help his friend, my father took them and hoped to sell them one day.

Thank goodness that never happened. Out of curiosity, I listened to them on our tiny record player and fell in love. Didn’t know much about the composers and the years they were born and all that good stuff; but I just fell in love with all the tunes.

It was at a much later date that I learned more about the composers and all their great tunes. Beethoven, Mozart, Liszt, Chopin, Tchaikovsky, Strauss and one of my favorites, Bizet. I wonder how these guys went to sleep at night, with all these wonderful melodies flowing through their heads.

I watch a little TV before I go to bed, it helps me relax a little bit. Amazing that now I am retired, I am busier than I ever had been.

I got to finish the book that I wanted to do for years (“Have You Eaten?”) and it should be coming out soon; my weekly column Wok & Roll; my cooking classes all over the place; my barbershop singing… my mind is going a mile a minute with all those thoughts shooting through it.

I came across YouTube a while back and there is a program that got me hooked. It is a competition with all these talented people. The programs are under different names, but it is the same principle — folks would go to the show and perform to the judges and get rated.

It can be singers, magicians, dancers … and they are all fascinating. Since I love classical music, the one program that attracted me the most is the five finalists who won. They are all from different talent shows around the world — Indonesia, Holland, England, America — yet they all share the same talent; and all young, 9 to 13, and beautiful.

I can’t help but falling in love with all of them. Somehow, they all chose to sing the same song by Puccini, “O Mi Babbino Caro.” A beautiful song about a young girl wanting to ask her father for his blessings as she planned to leave home with her lover. The song is filled with passion and emotion.

“Father, I want to go to Porta Russa to buy a ring. However, without your blessings, I would go to Ponte Vecchio and jump in the River Arno. I can no longer stand this pining and tormenting anymore.” Goodness.

Many famous sopranos have sung it in the past; but now, all these young singers would sing it with such emotion and passion. How do they ever learn what love is about; and to leave a comfortable home to stay with a stranger and to spend the rest of their life with him?

I guess that is the magic and power of love.

There are many operas in China written about young lovers who ended up in tragedy as the society just won’t accept their relationship. My favorite violin concerto “The Butterfly Lovers” was based on that love.

They died and were buried together. They turned to butterflies and were seen flying together forever to show their true love. Call that puppy love. But do you remember the old days about your first kiss? Did your heart stop beating for a second?

I love to sing because I can share my inner feelings with others. It is important that you can carry the tune, remember all the words and not shudder.

Yet, the most important part of singing, I found in my own way, is how to get the message of the song across to the audience. All these five young singers — Jackie Evancho, USA; Arielle Baril, Britain; Admira Willighagen, Holland; Laura Benton, USA; and Shikara, Indonesia, can sing the same song, not just with a beautiful voice, but with such emotion and conviction.

My goodness, what would I do if I were their father? Would I dare say “no”?