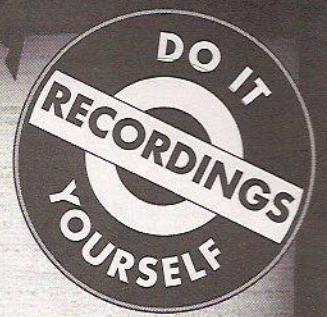


*Joseph Beer, 1908-1987*



# Songs My Father Taught Me

By Lissa A. H. Poirot

*Beatrice Beer is the third singer we profile this month. She was first introduced to Classical Singer through a chance meeting with C.F. Williamson on a New York subway. She is a young singer who has been pursuing an altruistic goal with the marketing of her very special recording and recital.*

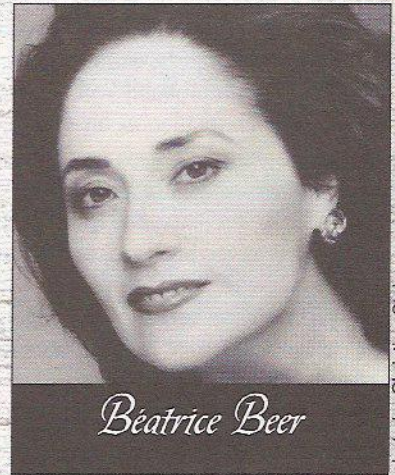


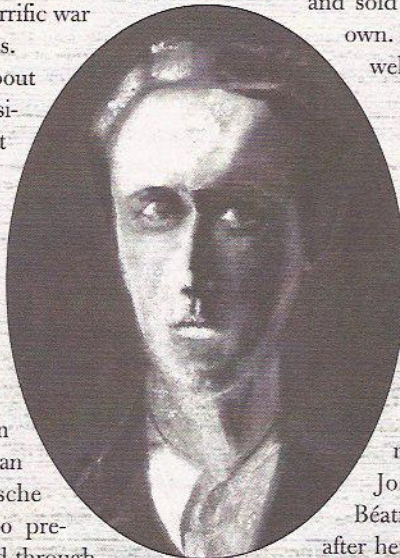
photo by Christian Steiner

Beatrice Beer

**THE HOLOCAUST.** The word conjures up horrible images and memories for anyone who lived through World War II or heard stories from concentration-camp survivors. Six million Jews were killed during the Holocaust. The number is staggering. Yet there were even more deaths during this horrific war that were not accounted for: the death of dreams.

Aspiring opera singer Béatrice Beer knows about these losses. Her father, Joseph Beer, was a classical composer whose dreams and career were cut short during the Holocaust. But Béatrice is hoping to rekindle interest in Joseph's lost compositions, while also fulfilling her own dream of becoming a professional opera singer. It is this inspiration in her father's life's work that has led Béatrice to make it her life's work.

Born in L'vov, Poland, Joseph Beer attended the Hochschule für Musik in Vienna. At the age of 25, Joseph's first opera, *Der Prinz Von Schiras*, premiered at the Zurich Opera with an international broadcast. In 1936, *Polnische Hochzeit*, composed in just three weeks, also premiered at the Zurich Opera and was performed throughout Europe on some 40 stages and in eight languages. Joseph was only 27 and his career was soaring as he gained recognition and fame. His dream of becoming a world-renowned composer was coming true.



Then in 1938, Joseph's career came to a grinding halt as the Nazis came into power. Joseph was Jewish and so his operas were banned. Fleeing to Nice, Joseph could only compose in his head. He continued to write music without the benefit of a piano or orchestra, and sold his works to other composers to claim as their own. By the end of the war, Joseph had lost his fame, as well as his mother, father and sister.

The devastation was so great that in later years, he would never speak about the war or his days of fame. When asked, he would simply become very quiet and distant. He no longer had the heart to pursue a career as a composer. The world did not know of the incredible talent that had been stolen ... at least not yet, Béatrice Beer says. It is said in the Beer household that when Béatrice was born, her cries were so loud that her father claimed she would grow up to be a fishmonger or an opera singer. Surrounded by her father's music and compositions throughout her life—Joseph never stopped composing privately—Béatrice developed a passion for classical music. It was after her father took her to *Carmen*, her first opera, that Béatrice was hooked. She began taking voice lessons at the age of 14, encouraged by her father to develop her voice. Still, her protective father wanted her to concentrate on her academic studies and earn a Ph.D. before attempting a musical career.

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Béatrice tried to heed her father's advice, pursuing a Bachelor's Degree in Comparative Literature, which she completed *summa cum laude*, from Louisiana State University. To her father's dismay, but secret joy, Béatrice headed to New York's Manhattan School of Music to pursue a career in opera, earning a Bachelor of Music in Vocal Performance. "My father said he was totally against it. My mother told me he was happy that I was doing it, but to me he would say, 'Why are you doing this? You should first finish with your Ph.D.' But that didn't happen. He passed away before I was done with my vocal studies."

After completing her studies, it was her husband John who suggested she try singing her father's operas, bringing his music to the forefront, while also finding the perfect arias to suit her mezzo-soprano voice. "The music suits me because it is very romantic. It has influences of the Russian and German romantics, but also Rafael, Mahler and, sometimes, even Gershwin. It's part of my blood. Although it's so demanding technically, emotionally, it's right there."

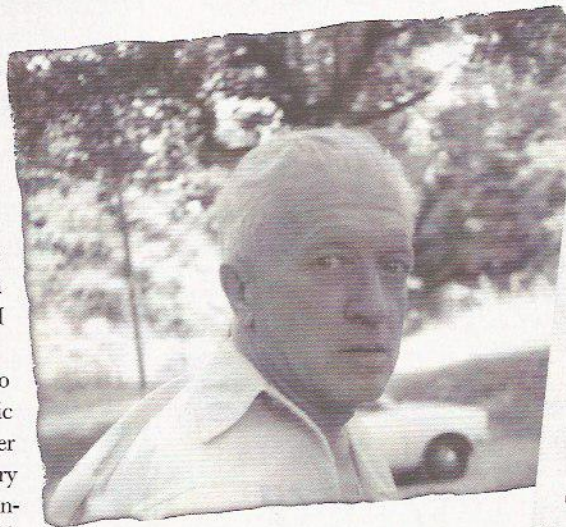
It took Béatrice nearly two years to filter through her father's handwritten compositions and prepare the work she would eventually begin to perform. While her father may have written only four or five operas, his perfectionism led to various versions of each opera. Fortunately, her mother had been Joseph's muse and guinea pig, and although she could not read music, she knew every version by heart, including words to arias where text was not recorded. After preparing all the operas, Béatrice needed to learn the mostly German-sung music, organize translations and create narration for her performances. In the meantime, she worked with smaller regional companies to continue her studies and acquire singing experience.

In 1999, Béatrice was ready to perform her father's operas. She began promoting herself through various marketing mailings to concert promoters, museums and libraries. She searched for venues that would be most interested in her concerts, sending family backgrounds and offering performances. She found that response to her mailings was minimal, so she began conducting follow-up calls daily. Luckily, she had the support of her husband, who helped with the financial costs of the mailings and phone calls. But marketing turned out to be a full-time job, one that was made more difficult by the need to continue her vocal training. After three years, she still struggles to balance both.

"You have to have a certain level of rest to really do some meaningful practice, so I'm always juggling," says Béatrice. "Do I do it in the morning? If I practice in the morning first, then it feels like the whole day is gone and I don't get anything done. And vice versa. If I call people all day, at the end of the day, I'm so tired and it's difficult to sing my big arias and a high C. You have to learn how to do it all."

Eventually, it was family luck that earned Béatrice her first concert performance. During an interview with Steven Spielberg's Survivors of the Shoah Visual Foundation, Béatrice's mother talked about Joseph's experiences. Her interviewer knew Musicologist Brett Werb at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and suggested Béatrice contact him. Within a week of receiving her letter, Werb asked if she would be interested in doing a tribute. In December 1999, Béatrice finally got her chance to perform her first concert and showcase her father's compositions at an event sponsored by the museum.

The performance led Béatrice to contacts in Israel and Germany, where she is currently trying to finalize two more concerts of "Beatrice Beer Sings



Joseph Beer" in Berlin and Tel Aviv for 2002. Other mailings have led to smaller venues, such as libraries and universities, including recent performances at New York's Lehman College and New York University. "I started by acquiring some experience in New York and now I'm branching out and trying to merge my own performances with my father's concerts to break into opera in a big way, knock on wood," Béatrice says, with a laugh.

Still, it's not always easy, she adds. "What I am doing is top-notch classical music," she says. "It's not acceptable to every venue, so it's difficult."

Béatrice's desire to bring her father's music to the public will not extinguish. She is attempting to branch out by developing various programs that combine her father's work with other more renowned composers. Her latest project, "Songs of the World," is a collection of songs by Bellini, Ravel, Copland and other composers who wrote music based on popular tunes, as her father had done.

Béatrice also has added auditions to her already hectic schedule so that she can get her name out amongst those in the industry and find bigger venues to earn a better living. She is also compiling her tapes for a digitally-enhanced compact disc. "The expense of the tapes wasn't that bad, but I want to do a nice CD and that's not cheap," she says. "There are some people in town, such as the Austrian Cultural Forum, who have taken an interest and want to help me and have told me that they may be able to help with funds. Although my father was born in Poland, in between World War I and II, Poland was Austria, so the Austrians want to help."

To make a living as an opera singer, Béatrice knows she has to market her talent, and will continue to find venues any way she can. Although she hasn't yet found the success she desires, Béatrice is still young and has a lot of time. She feels successful in that she has the support of her family and is carrying out her father's long-lost dream. She offers this advice to others who, like her, are just starting out: "Find what it is that makes you unique and specialize in that. For me, it was a godsend because it was my father. Coming up with your own show puts you in control of your destiny. You stop waiting for the phone to ring and start making things happen."

*Lissa A.H. Poirot is a freelance writer whose works have appeared in tennis, design and bridal magazines, among others. She lives in the Atlanta area with her husband Michael. She can be reached at [poirotpro@aol.com](mailto:poirotpro@aol.com).*



All photos/artwork courtesy of Béatrice Beer