

## *Ave verum corpus*

by Dan Chouinard



I was strapping on my bicycle helmet as Jean-Pierre leaned out of the driver's window with one last reminder about my homework. "Don't forget: Mozart and Brassens when you come back and see us next year."

In June of 2002, in the midst of a summer of bicycling around Europe with tent and accordion, I paused for two weeks at the secluded farm of Jean-Pierre and Luis in the south of France pulling weeds, chopping wood, harvesting rose petals for jam and playing accordion for their Green Party friends.

They were recent transplants from Paris. Luis was skinny and smiling and long-suffering, a Stan Laurel to Jean-Pierre's Oliver Hardy. Jean-Pierre had sold his bookstore to finance their move to the country. He was imposing and professorial, and impatient with my Greatest-Hits-of-Piaf-and-Chevalier repertoire. "You really should learn some Georges Brassens and some Occitan dance tunes." He softened when he talked about his father, recently gone. Someone had sung Mozart's *Ave verum corpus* at the funeral; he thought I should learn that too. When I left I promised I'd do my homework and come back and visit sometime.

In fall the next year I landed in Paris, loaded down with my old college backpack, my accordion and a nasty head cold. I'd packed a copy of the Mozart and I figured I'd go shopping for the rest of the music and find some charming little Parisian spots to play before I headed south in a few days.

I got myself a \$25-a-night room in a back alley flophouse in the Marais. "Are you sure?" The weary owner spoke through a tiny opening cut into the front door. "It's not fancy, just a trucker's hotel." I was in love with the idea of staying in a place that looked like it hadn't been touched since the War: brown paint on old wallpaper, shared bath on another floor, a bare room with a wooden chair and desk, a naked light bulb and a sagging bed.

By morning my still-nasty cold was now joined by a

crippling pain that I supposed was a trucker's backache. Undeterred, I sneezed and winced my way around Paris, seeking out *musique de rue* opportunities. Nights were long and sleepless. I pulled out the little red accordion and practiced the *Ave verum corpus* silently by the light of the bare bulb: *Hail true Body, who having truly suffered...* The medieval prayer was my anti-inflammatory. Mozart's choir and orchestra circled and beckoned one another like earth and moon, weaving a spell as deep as the tides.

I wasn't entirely well yet two days later when Jean-Pierre and Luis picked me up at the train station in Albi. On the bumpy and painful ride to the farm Jean-Pierre asked about my music homework, and I played the *Ave verum* from the back seat. "Beautiful," his eyes glistened in the rearview mirror. "The best I've ever heard it."

The weekend of honest outdoor work finally restored me to health, and at the end of a farewell dinner with friends we were singing our way through my new stack of French songbooks. By request I played the *Ave verum* once more, but now Jean-Pierre was dissatisfied, never again as moved as he had been that first night in the van. Had it been my physical suffering, he wondered, that inspired the performance? When the artist no longer suffers, his art suffers, *n'est-ce pas?*

I sat out this part of the conversation, happy to be roadworthy once again and looking forward to my morning flight to London in the company of Mozart, Brassens and the others, who dwelt now in heart and brain and fingertips, ready with their magic when next I needed them.

**Dan Chouinard** is a freelance pianist and accordionist who works often with Minnesota Public Radio and the Minnesota Historical Society to create shows that blend music and storytelling. In upcoming weeks he will revisit his latest show, *Rondo '56*, about St. Paul's African-American main street, and will make appearances with Prudence Johnson, Maria Jette and Ann Reed. Learn about his free monthly sing-along in Loring Park at [danchouinard.com](http://danchouinard.com).