According to German playwright and librettist Bertolt Brecht, “Art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it.” He and Kurt Weill created *Threepenny Opera* as an artistic tool, which forced cultural recognition and response to the political turmoil of post WWI Germany. Similarly for France *La Vie en Rose* offers a striking example of the interaction of culture and music during a pivotal period of human history, post-WWII. This song, generally attributed to Edith Piaf, emerged from its roots in chanson réaliste of the Parisian streets into post-WWII internationalism. Although, unlike Brecht, Piaf never enunciated the cultural significance of her art, her simple song came to represent both France and the existentially based response to the dark forces of the twentieth century.

Stephen Greenblatt, in his essay “Culture”, adroitly points out that a proper modern understanding of “culture” embraces both constraint and mobility. *La Vie en Rose*, composed in 1946, while being on one hand fully within the tradition of popular Parisian music, pushes that boundary to include an existential affirmation capable of resisting mankind’s darkest fears. In form a classic exemplar of the chanson réaliste, *La Vie en Rose* is said to have been composed by Luis Guglielmi, who was an Italian Catalan musician writing under the *nom de plume* “Louiguy”. However, most sources seem to agree that the song is very largely, if not wholly Piaf’s own; “*La Vie en Rose*, credited to R.S. Louiguy (real name Luis Guglielmi), though apparently composed by Piaf, and lyrics by Piaf, was her signature song” (Sadie, 2003). The popular tune
quickly became an international success. In June of 1950, *La Vie en Rose* reached U.S. charts with an instrumental version performed by the orchestras of Victor Young and Paul Weston, renowned American composers and pianists (Larkin, 2006).

Piaf, born to poverty and almost without any plausible hope for a future, managed to climb beyond her circumstances to grasp for the highest and best in the human soul or psyche, and in the course of her ascent, helped to shape a culture. Born in Belleville, Paris, December 19th, 1915, Piaf reached her period of greatest acclaim as the dark storm clouds of Nazism were finally giving way to the bright hopes of modern Europe. Existentialism was likewise beginning its ascent as a way of facing life made even more terrifying in its seemingly hopeless vulnerability to the horrors of the twentieth century. When Piaf sings in *La Vie en Rose*:

“Whereof I understand the reason.
It’s he for me and I for him, throughout life,
He has told me, he has sworn to me, for life.
And from the things that I sense,
Now I can feel within me
My heart that beats” (Keys, 2008).

These words both affirm life—existence, here and now, and also lift high the vérités of love and hope.

By taking a simple street theme of romantic love, perhaps even from the alleys of the Montmartre District of Paris, and infusing them with such a self-affirmation for the future, the song exhibits both the cultural constraint and the
liberating, pioneering mobility about which Greenblatt speaks. Tracing its nascence to
the 1880’s in the Montmartre district of Paris, up until the end of WWII, *chanson réaliste* was born in café-concerts and cabarets. The songs dealt with life in the poor Parisian faubourgs and the downtrodden criminals, orphans and prostitutes who lived there. These were the themes of the literary realists, such as Emile Zola, Jean Richepin, and Paul Bourget, prominent French writers who were influential in the development of the musical genre, *chanson réaliste* (Delanoe, 1997). While Edith Piaf’s lyrics seek to reassure a culture torn apart by poverty, political unrest and warfare, by depicting a world rendered “rosier” through love, her performances and waif-like appearance, as well as her own personal demons, demonstrate the stark characteristics of the *chanteuse réaliste*. In appearance, the *chanteuse* was true to the realistic genre, wearing, simple, black clothes and bright red lipstick. She was thin and small and short in stature. Her lifestyle of promiscuity, revolving-door relationships, and addiction to morphine and alcohol was prototypical of the street people about whom she sang. Although the form and performance of her music was undeniably within the street music tradition, Piaf deliberately veered her lyrical content toward a more uplifting vision of the world. To quote Piaf, “I don’t like realist songs…for me, they’re vulgar tunes with blokes wearing cloth capes and girls plying their trades on the streets. I hate that. I like flowers and simple love stories, health, joie de vivre and Paris” (Roux, 2008).

As did Weill before her, Piaf embraces a realistic approach to music composition by juxtaposing order with freedom within the piece. Order is
represented by the repetition of a simple melodic motif consisting of five notes. This unsophisticated melody is memorable, and therefore, easily assimilated into popular vernacular. Likewise in furtherance of order, and in contrast to pre-realist orchestrations, is the simplicity of the work’s instrumentation, consisting of guitar, violin, and classical woodwinds. However, the piece is novel in its departure from the conventional and in its recognition of street music through its simultaneous use of guitar, an instrument of the common man, and violin. Rhythmically, the song maintains cohesiveness by its use of common meter, while at the same time, expressing freedom by using mixed meter and free flowing melodies in alternating sections. Perhaps most notable and symbolic of change or mobility away from the old norm is the cabaret style delivery, wherein many of the lyrics are spoken, rather than sung, so that the listener experiences a more intimate connection to the singer and the lyrics. All of these elements create a composition which garnered the admiration of Piaf’s fellow countrymen (Lange, 1981).

Indeed, Piaf is enduringly revered as a symbolic representative of the determination and aspirations of the French people as they moved from their own provincialism to determined resistance to the Nazi threat, to a prominent place in post WWII international culture. For a time she was accused for collaborating with the Nazis because she sang for high ranking Germans at a Parisan cabaret. However, it is now clearly understood that she did this in order to pose for photographs with French prisoners of war. Without the knowledge of the Germans, Piaf gave the photos to underground workers who made counterfeit passports for all 150 French
captives. After returning to the camp again, Piaf secretly transferred the passports to the prisoners, some of whom managed to escape (Huey, 2009). Today, Piaf’s association with the French Resistance is well known, and many former Resistance members owe their lives to her. One is reminded of that empowering scene in Michael Crutz’s classic film, *Casablanca*, where all of the non-German attendees at Rick’s Café strike up *La Marseillaise*, France’s national anthem and drown out the German commandant’s attempts to sing *Deutschland Uber Alles,*” the Third Reich’s national anthem.

The determination, defiance, and rugged affirmation of hope in that scene is embodied in Edith Piaf’s career and especially in her song, *La Vie en Rose*. It is this affirmation that Greenblatt calls “the sign both of the power of art and of embeddedness of culture in the contingences of history.” It is, as he says, “the ability of artists it assembles that shapes the forces of their culture in novel ways so that elements powerfully interact…” To paraphrase Brecht’s quote regarding art, Piaf’s music was a hammer that powerfully influenced the shaping of a new reality in France. Even today visitors, both French and foreign, flock to her tomb at Père Lachaise Cemetery, in Paris (Lange, 1981), and for much of the modern world, *La Vie en Rose* capitalizes the essence and meaning of modern France.
Works Cited


