

**Michael Nyman (b. 1944)**  
**The Man Who Mistook His Wife For A Hat (1986)**

Libretto by Oliver Sacks, Christopher Rawlence and Michael Morris after *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For A Hat* (1985) by Oliver Sacks

Dr P ..... Matthew Treviño, Bass  
Mrs P ..... Rebecca Sjöwall, Soprano  
Neurologist ..... Ryan MacPherson, Tenor

DR. S  
Neurology's favorite term is deficit.  
The word denotes impairment, or incapacity of neurological function.  
Loss of language, memory, vision, dexterity, identity and a myriad of  
other lacks and losses of specific function.  
For all these dysfunctions (another favorite term), we have privative  
words of every sort...  
Aphonia, Aphemia, Aphasia, Alexia, Apraxia, Agnosia, Amnesia,  
Ataxia.  
A word for every specific neural or mental function of which patients  
may find themselves deprived.  
Deficit.  
Loss.  
Everything that patients aren't, and nothing that they are.  
Such language tells us nothing about an individual's history.  
It conveys nothing of the person, and the reality of facing disease and  
struggling to survive it.  
To restore the human subject at the center...  
The suffering, affected, fighting, human subject.  
We must deepen a case history to a narrative or tale...  
Only then do we have a WHO as well as a WHAT...  
A patient in relation to a disease...a real person.  
Doctor P was a musician of distinction.  
Well known for many years as a singer, and then at the local school as  
a teacher.  
It was here, in relation to his students, that certain problems were first  
observed.  
Sometimes a student would present himself, and Doctor P would not  
recognize him...  
Or specifically, would not recognize his face. The moment he spoke,  
he would be recognized by his voice.  
Such incidents multiplied, causing embarrassment, perplexity, fear,  
and, sometimes, comedy.  
For not only did Doctor P. increasingly fail to see faces...  
But he saw faces, where there were no faces to see.

DR.P  
Traffic.  
Street sounds.  
Distant trains.  
A Noise symphony.

MRS. P  
The music of the city.

MR. P  
The urban forest.  
More Cage, than Schumann.

DR. S  
Ah, Schumann.  
What a tooting and screeching and blaring of horns.

DR. P  
Da Tanzt wohl den Hochzeits reigen Die Herzallerliebste mine...  
(There, in the wedding circle. Dances my dear beloved.)

DR. S  
Now then, what is the matter?

DR. P  
Nothing. That I know of.

MRS. P  
He's absolutely healthy. He's as fit as a fiddle.

DR. P  
Still performing. Voice still perfect.

MRS. P  
He's always in demand. He's perfectly normal.

DR. S  
Then why are we here?

DR. P  
That's what I asked them.  
Why send me here when nothing is the matter?

MRS. P  
They tested his eyes...

DR. P  
And they said nothing's wrong.

MRS. P  
He sees perfectly well, but with diabetes...

DR. P  
It's just that...it's just that...  
It's just that they thought that...my eyesight...

MRS. P  
High blood pressure could damage...

DR. P  
But you can see there's nothing wrong.

DR. S  
Then why are we here?

DR. P  
Well, they said nothing wrong with my eyes.

MRS. P  
Last week he sang a lovely Dichterliebe at Carnegie Hall.

DR. P  
A small problem with the visual parts of my brain...

MRS. P  
Glowing reviews. And starting next week, a world tour.

DR. P  
Should see a neurologist.

MRS. P

And then he goes into his studio to record.

DR. P

Now and then people say I make silly mistakes.

MRS. P

There's nothing odd in that.  
Who doesn't make mistakes on occasion?

DR. P

That's why I'm here.

DR. S

No cause to worry. Excuse us.  
A few minutes. Just a routine test.

MRS. P

His silly mistakes. More like practical jokes. Always up to stunts.

DR. S

Palpitations. –

MRS. P

With his students, pretending this one was that one, and one the other.

DR. S

Cranial nerves.  
Visual field.  
Pupil response.

MRS. P

While dressing last month for a concert...  
I found him chatting with the carved knob of his favorite chair.

DR. S

Sensation. Vibratory sense.

MRS. P

Feigning anger when it wouldn't reply.

DR. S

Lower extremities.

MRS. P

Late for a concert. Got lost on the way.  
Doesn't read maps... Asked directions of a parking meter.  
Meter was silent so he put his arm round the shoulder of a pillar box.

DR. S

Babinski reflex.

MRS. P

Did it live locally? Like classical music? Did it know the way?  
But it didn't. Just stood there gaping.

DR. S

Well, his visual acuity's good...

MRS. P

And, after the concert...

DR. S

No problem with spotting a pin except when placed to the left.

MRS. P

...my Klaus shook the hand of a music stand.  
As though thanking Schumann in person.

DR. S

Reflexes too, pretty good.

But again, on the left, just a little.

MRS. P

But there's nothing the matter.

DR. S

It's the way he looks out.  
His gaze to the left. Just a trifle...abnormal.  
Can I help?

DR. P

Help? Help what? Help whom?

DR. S

Help you put on your shoe.

DR. P

Have I forgotten the shoe?  
The shoe? The shoe?

DR. S

Over here. To the left.  
Pick it up. Put it on.

DR. P

But where?  
What? But, this is my shoe?  
Yes. My eyes.  
Yes. This is my shoe.

DR. S

No this is your foot.

DR. S & MRS. P

(What did he say? What did he see?)

DR. S

That there is your shoe.

DR. P

Ah, I thought that was my foot.

DR. S & MRS. P

(Is he mad? Is she blind? Is this one of his silly mistakes?)

DR. P

One shoe off and another shoe on.

MRS. P

It's just one of his jokes.

DR. S

And yet.  
And yet there was something strange.

MRS. P

I'm glad it's not serious.

DR. S

No trace of dementia...but there was something odd.

MRS. P

Perhaps we should leave now...can't be late for his masterclass.

DR. S

He faced me as he spoke...yet; he looked at me with his ears, not his eyes.  
His eyes made sudden sharp fixations.

MRS. P

His whole life is music.

DR. S

The nose. The right ear. My chin. My left eye.

MRS. P

Performing and teaching.

DR. S

He saw me. No. He scanned me. Blips on his radar screen.

MRS. P

Retirement would kill him.

DR. S

Sought details. As if not seeing my whole face...

MRS. P

He must go on working.

DR. S

But only separate components.  
You can see very clearly...  
But what do you see? That interests me.

DR. P

I see a jagged edge. Castellations.

MRS. P

He offered to resign.

DR. P

I see a forest. Fierce teeth.  
Dark blades of grass. A graveyard.

DR. S

Fails to see the whole...only detail.

MRS. P

But his students still need him.

DR. P

I see a rocket or is it a syringe?  
Or a baton, or...a tombstone?

DR. S

He's drawn to a brightness. A color. A shape.

DR. P

I see a snowflake. A sunflower. Map of Dresden.

MRS. P

Only his work sustains him.

DR. P

No. A dinosaur.

DR. S

No sense of landscape. Only darting detail.  
What do you see now?

DR. P

I see a river.  
And a little guest house. It has a terrace by the water.  
People are dining out.  
Shaded beneath their parasols. It's heavenly. But there are clouds.  
Calm before the storm.

DR. S

Form is emptiness. Emptiness form.

MRS. P

Nothing much the matter.

DR. P

Is that it then? Session finished? We thank you and await diagnosis.  
Where's my hat?  
Oh my hat. My hat.  
Mistake? That fooled you all.

MRS. P

Where was his hat? In his hand? In his mind's eye?

DR. S

He's mistaken his wife for a hat.  
I was baffled. Astonished. Aghast.  
Yet he thought he'd done rather well.  
Took his leave with a hint of a smile.  
Did he know?  
Were they playing an elaborate joke? Who was examining whom?  
I could make no sense of what I'd seen in terms of conventional  
neurology.  
How could a professional musician... a practicing teacher...  
Mistake his wife for a hat?  
How does he learn his operatic roles? Can he still read music?  
What sense does he make of the chains of black blobs strung up on  
five lines?  
Is he suffering from Musical alexia?  
He did not make sense.  
On the one hand, perfectly preserved. On the other hand,  
incomprehensibly shattered.  
There were not textbook answers. I had to see him again on his own  
ground.  
Not as a patient in a clinic.  
I needed to watch him cope with the everyday workings of life.  
Observe the man in his natural habitat.  
Bosendorfer!

DR. P

I know that voice.

DR. S

Magnificent instrument!

MRS. P

The one thing we saved from Vienna.

DR. S

Dichterliebe!  
How I'd love... Would you mind? Will you play and sing?

MRS. P

My husband will sing.

DR. P

If you'd play.

MRS. P

It's his rheumatic hands.

DR. P

I no longer play.

DR. S

My sight-reading's poor.

DR. P

The damp.

MRS. P  
It stiffens his fingers.

DR. P  
I no longer read.

DR. S  
...Not in your league.

MRS. P  
A little shortsighted.

DR. P  
Will not...cannot read.

MRS. P  
So I'll play the piano for my husband.

DR. P  
No longer read music.  
Ich grolle nicht...und wenn das Herz auch bricht. (I'll not complain...even though my heart may break.)  
Ewig verlorne Lieb. (Love lost forever!)  
Ich grolle nicht. (I won't complain.)  
Wie du auch strahlst in Diamantenpracht, (However you may radiate with the glory of diamonds.)  
Es fällt kein Strahl in deines herzens Nacht. (None of the rays touches the darkness of your heart.)  
Das weis ich langst. (I've known this for so long.)  
Ich grolle nicht...und wen das Herz auch bricht. (I won't complain...even though my heart may break.)  
Ich sah dich ja im Traume. Und sah die Nacht in deines herzens Raume. (For I did see you in my dreams. I saw the darkness in your heart.)  
Und sah die Schlang. Die dir am Herzen frisst. (And I saw the serpent gnawing at your heart.)  
Ich sah, mein Lieb. Wie sehr du elend bist. (And I saw, my Love, how wretched you are.)  
Ich grolle nicht...ich grolle nicht. (I won't complain...I won't complain.)

DR. S & MRS. P  
He still has a perfect ear.  
His memories unimpaired.  
Perfect tonal and rhythmic discrimination and expression.  
A wonderful musical cortex. Temporal lobes intact.

DR. S  
But what of the parietal regions...the fibers, nerves, neurons...The synapses of occipital zones?  
What of the cytoarchitectonic...The structure of visual processing?  
How? What? Does he see?  
No problem with your voice or your ear. Now it's time for your eyes.

MRS. P  
Four of Spades on Five of Hearts.

DR. S  
What is this?

DR. P  
It's a tetrahedron.

MRS. P  
Nine of hearts on Ten of Clubs.

DR. S  
And now this?

DR. P  
Let me see.

It's an octahedron.

DR. S  
And this?

DR. P  
And this is a dodecahedron.

MRS. P  
Black Queen to red King.

DR. P  
And there's no need of the rest. I'll get the eikoshihedron as well.

DR. S  
No problem with abstract shapes.  
But does he see abstract images?

DR. P  
Jack of Spades.  
King of Clubs. Queen of Spades.

DR. S  
Does he see faces or stylized representation?

DR. P  
Who's the joker? Who's the joker?

DR. S  
Who do you see?

DR. P  
It's that funny nose...  
Schnozzle Durante.

MRS. P  
The memory...

DR. S  
And who do you see now?

DR. P  
I know that one. It's really easy.  
The angle. Havana. It's Winston Churchill's cigar.

MRS. P  
The conflict...

DR. S  
Who do you... What...what do you see?

DR. P  
Black...toothbrush moustache.

MRS. P  
The darkness...

DR. S  
Learned shapes... known landmarks.

DR. P  
Adolph Hitler.  
I know him. The hair, the eyebrows.

MRS. P  
God does not play dice.

DR. P  
Albert Einstein.

DR. S

Does he see people or simply schematic cued memories?  
Perhaps etched in his mind and then retrieved?  
How does he read expression?  
Configuration of feeling in motion?

DR. P

That's Alex. Can't mistake his body rhythm.  
What's... the... time?  
Now this must be the news.  
Let us listen to the headlines.

MRS. P

Dear Klaus rarely watches.

DR. P

No, it's a commercial for body lotions for use on beaches.  
Don't know that music.

MRS. P

He doesn't approve of TV. Waste of time.

DR. P

Or is it? What is it?

MRS. P

Always busy.

DR. P

I'm not really sure, but is it a sport of some kind?

MRS. P

We watch only arts programming.

DR. P

Are they wrestling?  
No. No. It's boxing.  
Who's fighting? Who's hitting whom?  
I don't follow...  
No, no, it's a dreadful quiz show.

DR. S

Think of stars.

DR. P

Men from Mars or maybe it's those men on the moon.  
No. Don't tell me. "One big step for mankind."  
Am I warm?

DR. S

Very cold.  
Try movie stars.

MRS. P

It's Bette Davis, you remember.

DR. P

The great tone is inaudible. The great image has no form.  
It's Gone... Gone... Gone with the Wind.

DR. S

Visually...computer-like...  
Cannot judge...how things relate...to each other...to himself.  
What is this?

DR. P

It's a square.

MRS. P

But which one?

DR. P

It's so flat and hard.

MRS. P

We'd just fallen in love.

DR. S

Please don't tell him.

DR. P

It's a picture.

DR. S

Of what and whom?

DR. P

A picture...

DR. S

He is blind to expression.

MRS. P

It's St. Stefansplatz.

DR. P

We had just fallen in love...in Vienna.

DR. S

(Does not recognize.) Who do you see?

MRS. P

So recently married...

DR. P

It's myself and my wife.

MRS. P

On our honeymoon.

DR. S

So, who's this?

DR. P

Why, that's Paul.

MRS. P

His brother.

DR. P

Those big teeth. Mole on cheek. Know him anywhere.

DR. S

He picks up obvious markers. Identikit features.  
And this? Quite a likeness.

DR. P

Bit faded. Can't remember.

MRS. P

My God...it's his mother.

DR. P

They all look the same.

MRS. P

Don't you recognize me?  
You took it yourself. You bought me that dress with the pattern.

DR. P  
That pattern. The crisscross...of course.  
How could I?

DR. S  
And this?  
Blank, motionless faces without personality.  
No one there is looking out. No person within.  
In the absence of obvious markers, he was utterly tragically lost.  
What is this?

DR. P  
Twelve inches in length. Convoluted red form.

DR. S  
But what do you think it is?

DR. P  
With a linear green attachment.

DR. S  
He dwells within schema. He's lost touch with the concrete world.

DR. P  
Not easy to say. No simple symmetry.

DR. S  
Robotic description. Picks out the salient.

DR. P  
I think this might be divine geometry.

DR. S  
Might he?

DR. P  
Inflorescence... A flower...  
Could it be?

DR. S  
Smell it.

DR. P  
Olfactory, algebra, mathematical odors.  
Whiffs of the infinite rose. Heaven in a wild flower.

MRS. P  
"O rose, thou art sick. The invisible worm that flies in the night..."  
"In the howling storm, has found out they bed of crimson joy. And his  
dark secret love does thy life destroy."

DR. S  
Now...what is this?

DR. P  
A continuous surface...that is softly enfolded. That is softly  
enfolded...on itself.

DR. S  
You are merely describing it.

DR. P  
One, two, three, four, five out pouchings.

DR. S  
I want to know what it is,

DR. P  
A container...

DR. S  
Containing what?

DR. P  
Its contents...

DR. S  
Which are what?

DR. P  
The pot's effectiveness lies in its nothingness.

DR. S  
Would you put something in it?

DR. P  
Coins of five different sizes.

DR. S  
Lifeless abstractions. Does part of your body feel drawn to explore?

DR. P  
The pigskin case of some precious device for the probing of my brain?  
To put in? To insert? To put on?

DR. S & MRS. P  
Any child would know a glove as a glove as going with a hand.  
But he's lost in a maze of inanimate schemata.  
Has he no visual sense? Has he no visual self?

DR. P  
My God...it's a glove!

DR. S  
Well done! Now let's see how you recall visual schema.

DR. P  
Yes, let's play chess.  
Though I can no longer distinguish pieces.  
Pawn to King 4.

DR. S  
Pawn to King 4.

DR. P  
Knight to Queen Bishop 3.

DR. S  
Knight to Queen Bishop 3

DR. P  
Pawn to Bishop 4.

DR. S  
Pawn takes Pawn.

DR. P  
Pawn to Queen 4.

DR. S  
Queen to Rook 5. Check.

DR. P  
King to King 2.

DR. S  
Pawn to Queen 4.

DR. P  
Pawn takes Pawn.

DR. S  
Bishop to Knights 5. Check.  
DR. P  
Knight to Bishop 3.

DR. S  
Castle.

DR. P  
Pawn takes Knight.

DR. S  
Bishop to Queen Bishop 4

DR. P  
Pawn takes Pawn. Check.

DR. S  
King to Knight 1.

DR. P  
Knight to Knight 5.

DR. S  
Knight to Bishop 3

DR. P  
King to Queen 3.

DR. S  
Queen to Rook 4.

DR. P  
King to Bishop 3.

DR. S  
Bishop takes Pawn. Check.

DR. P  
Queen's Knight takes Bishop.

DR. S  
Queen to Bishop 4. Check.

DR. P  
King to Knight 3

DR. S  
Queen to Knight 3. Check.

DR. P  
Bishop to Knight 5.

DR. S  
Bishop takes Knight.

DR. P  
Queen takes Bishop.

DR. S  
Rook takes Knight.

DR. P  
Queen to Bishop 6

DR. S  
Queen to Rook 4

DR. P  
Pawn to Bishop 3

DR. S  
Rook to Queen 3

DR. P  
Queen to Bishop 4

DR. S  
Pawn to Knight 4.

DR. P  
King to Bishop 2

DR. S  
You win. I resign.

DR. P  
The Steinitz Gambit! Don't you know it?

DR. S & MRS. P  
What are we to make of a man so strangely unable to judge a glove as a glove, yet a master of mental chess?

DR. S  
His visualization of faces...narrative and drama is impaired...  
But visualization of schemata is completely unimpaired.  
But what of descriptive memory?  
How do you recall the texture, the color, the detail of the city we live in?  
So talk me down Hope Street.  
It's a street we both know.

DR. P  
From our end...high up there...  
The family that argues from that open window wafts Mozart.

MRS. P  
Those stone steps...

DR. S  
But...what do you see?

DR. P  
The awning, the door man...

MRS. P  
Busts of composers.

DR. P  
Red brick mason block...

MRS. P  
Those columns and porticos.

DR. P  
Chicken Tikka. The Bombay.  
Hello, Mister Singh. Flapping washing, high up.  
Chimney pot battlements.

MRS. P  
Parking meters.

DR. P  
A row of town houses embalmed in wisteria.

MRS. P  
Traffic lights.

DR. P  
Psychoanalysts' clinics. All coming and going. Front gate squeaking.  
Cars starting up.

DR. S  
Where are they, these cars?

DR. P  
On my...if I turn to my...if I turn...  
On my right there are those traffic lights.  
And the parking meters.

MRS. P  
The clinic.

DR. P  
And the screeching of tires. And the slamming of doors.

DR. S  
What do you see?

MRS. P  
Wisteria.

DR. P  
The columns and the porticos.

DR. S  
He sees only the right side.  
The restaurant, the doorman, the washing are no longer there.

MRS. P  
Chimney pot.

DR. P  
Busts of Bach, Chopin, Beethoven and Liszt.  
Stone steps, revolving doors.

Mrs. P  
The Bombay. Red brick block.

DR. P  
And they're late...late again for my class.

DR. S  
No leftness. Just darkness.  
A lopsided memory. Bisected mind's eye.  
You're husband's a painter I see.

MRS. P  
Had a show every year at the college where he teaches.  
He was very highly regarded.

DR. P  
Nothing exceptional. An amateur dauber.

MRS. P  
Gifted painter as well as a singer.

DR. P  
Was a painter...still a singer.

DR. S  
I looked at them. Curiously peered at the early work.  
Dated and signed.  
Finely detailed and concrete. A refugee family...mother and child.

MRS. P  
He started painting when we lived in Vienna.

DR. S  
Displaced Europeans, uprooted. Tragically exiled.

MRS. P  
When we were forced to flee to this city, he continued to paint.

DR. S  
The grief of survivors...the weeping and sobbing.

MRS. P  
Seeking the faces of those we had lost.

DR. S  
Years later, this vividness waned...faces fractured...

MRS. P  
The anguish of war...

DR. S  
Natural curves became angular...almost cubist.

MRS. P  
Severed loves...torn lives...shattered dreams.

DR. S  
Then less and less concrete images. More abstract expressionist.

MRS. P  
But the feeling...still passionate memories arrested in space.

DR. S  
But in the more recent paintings...  
I hardly dare to say it. Painted gesture has degenerated into more  
marks...  
Lines without meaning. Empty shapes.

MRS. P  
No, you've got it all wrong. You know nothing about modern art.

DR. S  
Random blotches...the work of a child.

MRS. P  
Do you not see development?  
Rejection? Reduction? Refinement?

DR. S  
I see the advancing pathology making no sense of the world out there.

MRS. P  
You're an ignorant, arrogant man. He progressed to the abstract.  
Pure, painful painted emotions.  
Feeling embodied in measured brushstrokes.

DR. S  
Perhaps she was partly right.  
Might not the condition of his eyes...condition his sight...  
Stripping it down to see through the gross texture of things to their  
essence?  
Perhaps his growth as an artist went hand in hand with his illness.  
Creating original form.  
No, that wasn't it. In these last works I sense only chaos  
Agnosia... The realm of neurology...not art.

MRS. P  
Philistine!

DR. P  
Tea from China. Lovely fragrance.

DR. S

Tell me. How does he manage?  
How can he get dressed or take a bath or tie a shoelace? How does he manage?

MRS. P

Listen now. Hear him eating, hungrily. Hummingly.  
How he sings to himself...all the time...  
Dressing songs...bathing songs...eating songs...  
I lay everything out. Each thing in its place, to a pattern we both know.

DR. S

But, how do you manage?

MRS. P

Then we'll dress, then we'll bathe, then we'll dine.  
As if programmed by his dressing songs, bathing songs, eating songs.  
But when interrupted, he loses his thread. Disintegrates. Grinds to a halt. Complete stop.

DR. P

Well, Doctor...you find me an interesting case.  
Can you tell me what's wrong? What is it I should do?

DR. S

I cannot tell you what is wrong... But I know what is right.  
You are a wonderful singer...a lifelong musician. You have centered your whole life around music.  
And now you use music to organize your life. My only prescription is more music!  
More music!  
This was some time ago, and often, since then, I've found myself wondering how he comprehended the world. Put myself in his shoes. Worn his hat, so to speak. Imagined his vision. The strange loss of image, yet preserved musicality. I think that music, for him, took the place of the image.  
He had no body image...he had body music.  
And to this inner soundtrack, he moved, he acted. Fluently. Cogently.  
But, when the music stopped...so did he.