Date du récital/Date of recital: November 4, 2022

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The Judgment of Pygmalion

Dean Burry's opera *Il giudizio di Pigmalione* transposes the classic myth from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* into an Italian fashion magazine's conflict with today's feminist movement. In the story, Ovid writes:

He [Pygmalion] made, with marvellous art, an ivory statue,

As white as snow, and gave it greater beauty

Than any girl could have, and fell in love

With his own workmanship.

Burry transforms this ivory statue into a photoshopped image; it is something one often sees on billboard advertisements in the city where there are models with perfectly symmetrical faces, bodies, and muscles.

In Opera McGill's production of *Pigmalione,* the director Anna Theodosakis further explores Burry's view of perfectionism. She transforms Pygmalion's creation into a grotesque "Frankenstein" combined of different body parts of varying shapes and sizes. Her concept emphasizes Pygmalion's distorted interpretation of beauty, and it gives the audience the

impression that women suffer through the arbitrary beauty standards imposed by the male gender. Theodosakis's staging of Galatea is the most effective part of the production. By appealing to the horror of what Pygmalion created, Theodosakis shocks audience members, especially men such as myself, into examining unconscious biases that we may hold. These biases take the form of fatphobia, colorism, and racism. Additionally, Theodosakis invokes not only the Women's Marches during the Trump administration, but also other political issues such as *Roe v Wade* and women's rights in Iran. In brief, I hope to see that all this potentially "trendy" material can fit seamlessly into the story rather than draw focus away from the main theme of perfectionism.

Aside from the "toxic masculinity" narrative that today's media push onto men, there is not an attempt to include other male perspectives into *Pigmalione.* One can agree with the idea that trying to be perfect can lead to issues such as anxiety, body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), and depression. However, Burry could welcome another male character who struggles with these issues. BDD and other mental health issues affect men just as much as women. There are plenty of men who do not consider themselves handsome, strong, or fit enough compared to the images of men with six-pack abdominal muscles and thick arms. For example, the Netflix documentary *White Hot* argued the elite brand of *Abercrombie & Fitch* also incorporated racism into an "all-American" aesthetic. It idealized the White, blond-haired, blue-eyed, tall, and muscular man. Growing up in the 2000s I would always see images of these beautiful men as I walked through the mall. No matter how hard I dieted, exercised, or even avoided sun exposure, I could never look like that kind of man. Without reservation, men of all types belong in today's debates on objectification and perfectionism; women are not the only affected people.

To learn the role of Pigmalione was to complete and add various small parts of a project into a whole sum. The largest challenges were the learning of Pygmalion's dissonant melodies at the start and end of the opera, and the memorizing of the text in rhythm. I started with treating the text like a script and memorized it scene-by-scene. After each scene, I took the music to the practice room and started working on each line. In these scenes, he sings harsh-sounding intervals in areas of anger or frustration. The learning of the melodies oftentimes seemed like the punching of random pitches on a piano. To allow me to feel the music more intensely, my teacher Brett Polegato advised me to "find the melody" in each of these sections. We worked through it by adjusting the harsher intervals into sweeter chords. I sang the melodies with these adjusted chords, and then I sang the melodies as originally written. This process helped me to create musical phrases out of material that could have sounded like Schoenberg's eerie atonal music.

I have learned to embrace the darker side of my personality to portray Pygmalion. I usually maintain a positive attitude and strive to do my best, so I looked through my own life and substituted negative experiences into the character. I approach the role through the lens of Method acting where one must live the character as a real person. The character Pigmalione is not an entirely irredeemable person; I avoid judging him. Instead, I view him as an anxiety-ridden creative who wants to create the perfect work of art. He does whatever it takes to achieve this goal. And once he gets it, he falls in love with the masterpiece. A pertinent trait of Pygmalion is that he is brutally honest. I share that value and sometimes find myself measuring others according to a "scale" of honesty. To start getting into Pygmalion's headspace, I oftentimes allow myself to enter and even augment a judgmental attitude. The audience should know that Pygmalion truly does not care about the feelings of other people unless they have

power over him. He embraces who he is and wants people to revel in his glory. Pygmalion's ideology is today's gospel of self-love taken to an extreme level.

Burry's *Il giudizio di Pigmalione* plays with ugliness and beauty as commentary on today's debates over women's rights, mental health, and perfectionism. It is interesting to note that Burry's music is often dissonant with unusual meters during the protest and when Pygmalion fights with the protesters. The music evokes the ugliness of protest. Afterward, the music becomes beautifully consonant in the middle sections where Pygmalion realizes his creation and falls in love. In these areas, Burry introduces tone clusters and jazzy chords to evoke a sense of euphoria. The role of Pygmalion is no longer like the first days in the practice room where I would play dissonant chords and attempt to find a pitch to sing. As I continue throughout the rehearsal process, muscle memory takes over, and the role seems easier to sing. One must traverse difficult moments to find beauty in the world, and the journey of Burry's *Pigmalione* is no different.