

PUBERTY II: Exploring Musical Narrative

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My project, titled “Puberty II,” was an intersectional exploration of contemporary Asian-American experiences through music and dramatic text. During the spring 2018 semester, I re-orchestrated and arranged songs by Mitski, a contemporary Japanese-American artist, to create an original theatrical work, *Puberty II*. The music was framed by original text, which was written by Stefani Kuo. The culminating result was a 90-minute show, “Puberty II,” named after a Mitski album of the same name. Through three dramatized narratives of Asian-American female students, the show explored how themes of self-identity, feelings of inadequacy, societal beauty standards, and fetishization can impact Asian-American women. I approached my re-arrangement of Mitski’s music as a way to highlight these aforementioned themes and propel the narrative forwards. So, although this project diverged from my original plan to explore musical storytelling and narrative for children, I found that many of the structural concepts from the previous project carried over. There was a similar emphasis on learning how to make music a key vehicle for dramatic narrative, whether that was for entertaining children or in expressing Asian-American experiences.

While Mitski’s music is orchestrated for a classic rock band, I had an eight-person pit band on stage: violin, violoncello, flute, tenor saxophone, electric guitar, electric bass, keyboard, and drums. This meant that I also orchestrated all the various parts, which involved a significant amount of re-composing in addition to arranging. Additionally, since she is a solo singer, I re-arranged many of the vocal harmonies for multiple voices (for my three singers) in ways that would best situate the songs within the story. Other methods through which I explored furthering narrative through music were: transposing, composing new transitions between scenes/songs, using reoccurring musical “themes” to create a sense of musical coherence, and repeating a previously heard song in a dramatically different re-interpretation.

The show went through two iterations: a workshop performance in Wish Theater on April 23rd, then a more finalized set of two performances in Studzinski Recital Hall on May 12th and 13th. The funds from the Grua/O’Connell Research Award were used, as originally stated in my fall budget, to hire capable musicians, as well as purchase various props that were crucial to the show.

In conclusion, this project was an empowering way for me to combine my love of music and use it in ways to share intersectional stories that are not usually highlighted or shown at Bowdoin. At the same time, I would like to acknowledge this was an artistic, personal — and therefore, extremely limited — exploration of Asian-American experiences; I am aware that *Puberty II* was exactly that: a “piece.” This was not meant to be a work that proclaims an all-encompassing political manifesto or representative of *all* Asian-Americans; I simply wanted to document some of our feelings through music and drama – and, furthermore, these feelings are not necessarily exclusively “Asian-American.” Mitski similarly stated, “When I’m feeling feelings, I’m not feeling

Carol Hanisch famously wrote, “The personal is political.” My personal experience can remain apolitical.

After sharing the show with the general public, I received feedback from audience members and heard that “I attended. I was glad to hear many found it relatable.” Women of color stated that it was also an important piece of material. If you would like to see video of the show, please email jyoo2@bowdoin.edu

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Faculty Mentor: Vineet Shende (was previously Robert Greenlee)

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