

# Q&A: NICO MUHLY

With his new opera, *Marnie*, the queer composer takes #MeToo to the Met.

Photography by RICHARD GILLIGAN

**DON'T PIGEONHOLE** Nico Muhly. The 37-year-old, Vermont-born composer's third opera, *Marnie*, based on the 1961 Winston Graham novel previously adapted by Alfred Hitchcock, takes inspiration, in part, from Muhly's decades-long obsession with the Renaissance choral tradition but also from American minimalists like Philip Glass, for whom he worked while studying literature at Columbia University and composition at Juilliard. That he has also collaborated with Usher, Anohni, The National, and myriad other artists—while somehow finding time to write for television and film, including the score for *The Reader* (2008)—may surprise many at the Metropolitan Opera this October, when *Marnie* has its U.S. premiere. It shouldn't though, as his musical genre-hopping has always enriched his classical work.

Stifled desire and the impediments that restrict expressions of self-identity

are foregrounded in all three of Muhly's operas. *Dark Sisters* (2011) followed women struggling with the oppressive patriarchy of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, while *Two Boys* (2011)—which critic Wayne Koestenbaum praised as “an incredible coup for outrageous queer thinking”—focused on the relationship between two teenage boys navigating the liberating and libidinous world of internet chat rooms. The title character in *Marnie* is a mystery, as much to the audience as to herself, despite the tendency of the men in her life to constantly assert their knowledge of and control over her. Directed by Michael Mayer (*A Home at the End of the World*), the coproduction with the English National Opera brings psychological complexity and high drama to the opera stage, prompting audiences to analyze alongside *Marnie* the iron-fisted systems that surround them.

—CHARLES SHAFIAIEH

**What about *Marnie* seemed fitting for an opera?**

So much of theater and opera is about what happens when you lie. Sometimes the lie can be simple; sometimes it can be a disguise. I immediately thought that *Marnie* would be an amazing story because the whole point is that we never know who *Marnie* is. She exists, quite explicitly, in the male gaze, and is constantly the victim of—or manipulating—that, and it's not until she gets caught by [her boss] that it becomes quite clear what the consequences of all these disguises are, but also how she can use that awareness against him. I thought that was a really powerful topic for an opera and a vehicle to talk about more complicated things.

**With the #MeToo movement, this story makes the Metropolitan Opera seem much more au courant than**



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**usual. How do you dramatize *Marnie*'s terrorization?**

Tippi Hedren gave this extraordinary interview about Hitchcock assaulting her during the production of the movie, and Michael came up with this idea that *Marnie* is menaced by what could be visible or invisible men dressed up in the costumes of the period. It doesn't matter if they're people in the street, in the office, or inside her—or our—head. There is this sense of her as prey, existing inside the language of male hunger and violence.

**In many ways, though, the opera is quite distinct from the film.**

I watched the movie in 2014, took a

million notes, and haven't watched it again. The novel is set in England in the late '50s as opposed to the '60s, which opened up a lot more possibilities for me. The '50s setting makes *Marnie*'s forward-seeming psychoanalysis session much more curious, and having that take place in England makes it even more outrageous.

**Do you see yourself mirrored in the opera?**

Not really. This opera was easier to write because I wasn't dealing with things happening in my own life, with people my own age—as with *Two Boys*. But, in the first act, *Marnie*'s constantly asking, “Why are you how you are? Is

there an internal bit to you, or do you only exist how you're perceived?” That's something we all deal with. The thing that people know about artists is their work, and then you interpret internal, psychological things. So, in a sense, the answer is “no” and “totally.”

**What about your personal listening habits these days?**

When I'm in the middle of writing music, I try not to listen to things I'm going to get too interested in. I'll listen to what I know, to be in a familiar landscape. But you have to cook to Paul Simon's *Graceland*. Maybe *The Rhythm of the Saints*. But let's not get hysterical.

**Some operagoers may be surprised that you're not just shut in with Anglican hymns or John Adams operas. Critics even seem irritated that they can't force you into a specific genre. How do you react to that?**

In a weird way, the death of record stores was a good thing. I spent half of my life at Tower Records on 66th Street, but I think taxonomies can be useful if everything's dead. It was like porn going into that glassed-in classical room, within which—for the really freaky people—was opera. Cross referencing is so much more interesting. Take the work I've done with Sam Amidon. I don't know where you'd put that in Tower Records. And where does Laurie Anderson go? If Laurie doesn't have a house there, I'm not interested.

It's not that all music is genre-free, but everyone is from somewhere, and that doesn't change. I'm from the classical tradition, but that doesn't mean I can't have a good time elsewhere. It's about fluency, and a mother tongue. When you venture into something else, you bring things home. But in the record store world, you'd never be able to connect me as the arranger of a song on a Grizzly Bear album and the person who wrote that weirdo piece for orchestra, two floors up in the sex room. ■

*Marnie opens at the Metropolitan Opera October 19.*