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English 289H

October 17, 2011

The Age of the Diva:

Advertisements for Aspiring Opera Singers

Classical musicians have a universal repute for being intelligent, ambitious, self-depreciating, and, without a doubt, competitive. While it is indisputable that opera singers possess these general characteristics, the overall “First Person Singular” atmosphere of modern society has resurrected the age of the diva, the leading lady that closes the show with a fantastic high note worthy of shattering hearts, not just wine glasses (Williams 449). But in order to be the star, divas must contend with far more than their 17th century Italian ancestors. Aspiring opera singers are expected to study centuries of history, repertoire, literature and language on top of the hours they spend in a practice room agonizing over the art of beautiful singing. Thus, singers need respectable recordings in order to help familiarize themselves with new repertoire, imitate the singing technique of established singers, and gain ideas about musicality and drama in the most time-efficient way possible. They rely on these recordings to help them realize their desires, which include gaining justification for studying music, enhancing their marketability so that they can sustain satisfactory careers, and above all, experiencing the fame, success, and glory associated with a life of performing. Recording companies capitalize on their audience’s needs by idealizing their desires on advertisements for opera CDs. Because recording companies recognize that musicians want to feel justified in their decision to study music, sustain a stable career, and ultimately perform regularly, CD advertisements aimed at aspiring opera singers idealize the academia, physical beauty and glamour associated with opera in order to convince singers that their product will help them achieve their dreams.

Recording companies take advantage of the aspiring singer’s wish for vindication by producing advertisements that incorporate scholarly references. Many music students harbor a certain degree of insecurity about their decision to pursue a career that usually results in little pay and lots of rejection. These scholarly references respond to this insecurity by idealizing the benefits of studying music, emphasizing the superior sophistication and enlightenment they gain from focusing on world culture and the arts. This strategy sets a challenge; in most cases, only true opera students can appreciate the references, thereby giving the product a flattering sense of elite refinement. Because the college-aged demographic generally enjoys feeling as if they are part of an elite group, this is a very effective advertising ploy (Marchland 183). Further, merely including these references helps the company prove that their CD is impressive enough to be worth time and money. Advertisements that idealize music academia usually provide images of classical/romantic paintings or artistic photographs that might be associated with the type of music on the CD. The typical rhetorical strategies include associations with great singers and listing awards for the musicians involved with the recording. These academic-oriented advertisements also include certain iconography; there is usually some association with ideal love, sophisticated art, foreign language and world culture. One particular advertisement for a recording of Loewe songs and ballads in *OperaNews* employs a beautiful painting from the romantic period that idealizes love. Only someone who has studied vocal song history would understand the connection between the Loewe ballads and dramatic love scenes. This artistic reference not only responds to the aspiring singer’s need to learn new repertoire by symbolizing the contents of the CD, but also idealizes the superior sophistication of musicians. An advertisement for Marcello Giordani’s new recording employs a similar strategy; Giordani is positioned on the cover of his CD, face full of emotive expression, with the Italian inscription, “Ti voglio tanto bene.” This advertisement responds to the audience’s need to listen to good singing technique and idealizes the singer’s education by including a phrase that only people immersed in the study of opera language would understand. By idealizing the music academia, recording advertisements flatter the aspiring singer’s desire to feel justified in their choice to study music.

Recording companies exploit the aspiring singer’s desire to achieve utmost marketability by producing advertisements that highlight the skinny, sexy and bejeweled bodies of established opera divas. In the past, opera was one of the few performing arts genres to accept all shapes and sizes of people; the most important part of the performance was always the size and quality of the voice, as well as the singer’s knowledge of technique and musicality. However, because of decreased funding for the arts, there has been a recent movement to revive opera as a flashy and sexy art form in order to increase its popularity. This is reflected in recording advertisements that feature opera divas in dramatic, sensual poses, dressed to the nines in expensive gowns and jewelry that accentuate their thin bodies. Advertisements that idealize future marketability through body type and sensuality use stock rhetorical techniques like association with famous divas, dark lighting, frequent use of the color red, and abounding alliteration. Iconographic features include a strong focus on love and sex, some level of sophistication, and a clear emphasis on glamour and riches. The opera diva, almost always a woman, is depicted alone with a daring or dramatic expression. One such advertisement for a recital CD by Kate Royal depicts the diva lying down casually on her side, her silky gown flowing lazily over her body as she looks dramatically into the distance. The CD is titled “A Lesson in Love” and is described as an “intimate recital of love won and lost;” the entire ad is colored in red. This advertisement is just one example of recording companies joining the industry that has “equated starvation and drug addiction with women’s beauty for decades” (Pozner 216); ignoring the majority of opera singers that fare on the heavier side, these types of advertisementsfocus on the very small group of singers that are actually skinny. Further, these advertisements promote sex-sells marketing with an upper-crust allure, represented by the skin-tight, revealing, and expensive gowns dripping with jewels and pearls. These types of advertisements idealize the physicality, sensuality and grandeur necessary to be hired in the opera world and successfully play with the aspiring singer’s desire to maintain a stable career.

Advertisements that idealize the glamour associated with a performance career capitalize on the aspiring singer’s desire to perform regularly. In many ways, opera singers are the perfect “Achievers” in that they “like the concept of prestige;” considering that their job is almost exclusively a “source of duty [and] reward,” most aspiring singers will sacrifice a great deal in order to follow their dreams of performance (Twitchell 194). Thus, advertising companies idealize the fame, success and glory, evoking “a mixture of projection, longing, admiration, and aspiration” in aspiring opera singers, expanding on their need to imitate the glamorous careers of their opera idols (Postrel 352). The most important rhetorical technique in this type of advertising is association with famous singers that are renown for their performance careers, although other techniques include iconographic representations of sophistication and riches. The diva/o, male or female, is usually placed at the center of the advertisement wearing some expression of triumph and surrounded by softer colors that do not detract from their glamorous pose. These elements are present in Anna Netrebko’s most recent recording advertisement, which includes a headline boasting, “in the prime of her career, she is our *reigning superstar diva”* as she gazes gleefully into the heavens. The recording company acknowledges the aspiring singer’s need to imitate established singers and romanticizes the fame associated with a performance career. Alternately, Nicholas Phan’s new advertisement for his recording of Benjamin Britten songs boasts that the tenor is on par with “the finest international artists” of his time, while Netrebko’s ad includes a complete list of the lead roles she has performed on the distinguished Metropolitan Opera stage. This subtly different advertising technique glorifies the success possible in a performance career and urges aspiring singers to the imitate divas. In order to idealize the glory in performance, the Netrebko advertisement brags in bold, “Anna Netrebko in her Greatest Moments on the Greatest Stage of them All,” representing her high honor won by outstanding achievement. The advertisements prove that idealizing the fame, success and glory of a performance career is highly effective in appealing to the needs and desires of aspiring singers because of the musician’s motivation.

Recognizing the desires of aspiring singers, recording companies model their CD advertisements to best idealize the academia, physical beauty and glamour associated with opera. Because recording companies assume that musicians are intelligent, ambitious, critical, and competitive, they conclude that their audience will sacrifice a great deal to better their careers. Thus, their advertisements are infused with specific rhetorical techniques in order to convince singers that their product will help them achieve their dreams. All of these idealizations and rhetorical techniques reflect the needs and desires of aspiring opera singers, thereby representing the mounting expectations of the modern opera world.

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