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The American Nightmare: Missy Mazzoli Uses of Text Painting to Highlight Karen Russell's Interpretation of the American Dream in *Proving Up*

Much of what has been written about the operatic staging of *Proving Up* pertains to Missy Mazzoli's gender and/or how creating new operas is a difficult endeavor in the twenty-first century. The opera was completed and premiered in 2018.¹ Given how new it is, it remains difficult to find much written about the content of the opera itself. However, in a 2015 interview for *Opera News*, Adam Wasserman asked, "How [do] you go about creating characterization in your music?"² This paper will explore Wasserman's initial question, and argue that Mazzoli's use of text painting further depicts the morbid perspective on the American Dream presented in Karen Russell's original story.

Before *Proving Up* was an opera, it started as a short story from Karen Russell's 2013 book *Vampires in a Lemon Grove*.³ Within its pages are a series of short stories that often follow supernatural plots to depict a dark and twisted theme. The story of "Proving Up" is no exception. The narrative follows the fictional Zegner family in their pursuit to survive in Nebraska. Enticed to move west by the Homestead Act of 1862, the act promised a land title to any family that could meet the outlined stipulations. The story refers to earning this title as "proving up." Not too long into the story the audience learns that hardships plague the Zegner family.

¹ Missy Mazzoli, "Proving Up," Missy Mazzoli, Missy Mazzoli, accessed April 22, 2021, <https://missymazzoli.com/recordings/proving-up/>.

² Adam Wasserman, "Sonic Youths," *Opera News*, *Opera News*, October 2015, accessed April 13, 2021, https://www.operanews.com/Opera_News_Magazine/2015/10/Features/Sonic_Youths.html.

³ Mazzoli, "Proving Up," Missy Mazzoli.

Russell's short story provides an alternative look at the American Dream that is often overlooked and ignored. The Zegners fall victim to the idea that working hard does not mean that everything will go well and turn out fine in the end. The unfortunate truth is that sometimes there are powers beyond anybody's control that will stop you from achieving your goal(s). Mazzoli further explores this concept through her compositional choices in her opera. In answering Wasserman's question, she states that she starts with "some sort of melody that [illuminates a character's] psychological state at that moment. Then I'll find ways to develop it."⁴ Exploring this idea further, I will argue that Mazzoli deliberately uses text painting to characterize Pa Zegner and his deteriorating mental stability and relationship with proving up, all of the primary characters' respective relationships with the Inspector, and the use of the Zegner daughters' singing to provide multiple meanings to the text.

Wasserman's question provides us an interesting lens through which we can examine how Mazzoli uses text painting to characterize Russell's original characters. Johannes Zegner, referred simply as Pa throughout the opera, is the patriarch of the Zegner family. At the start of the opera, he seems like a fairly optimistic character who believes that his family can one day prove up and become landowners. However, upon further examination we learn that Pa suffers from a dark past that leaves him tormented. Pa struggles with internal turmoil that manifests itself outwardly, as seen in his heavy drinking throughout the opening scenes of the opera. Mazzoli also depicts Pa's mental plunge through her melodic choices.

The Homestead Act of 1862 outlines four specific stipulations for a family to prove up and earn a title to their land. First is a sod house, second is acres of grain, third is five years of

⁴ Wasserman, "Sonic Youths," Opera News.

harvest, and last is a window of glass. Referred to as an “oddity,” the window and how Pa obtained his is the catalyst for his mental descent. Part way through the opera, a drunken Pa tells the story to his youngest son Miles about where the Zegner’s glass window comes from. When traveling to visit a neighboring family, the Yothers, he found their farm abandoned. The Yothers had previously proven up and had a glass window set in the windowsill of their sod house. Determined to prove up, Pa makes a decision that causes him future harm. Being the last stipulation he needed to meet in order to prove up himself, Pa decided to steal the glass from the Yothers. Sometime after this theft is where the opera begins, and it is clear to see that Pa has struggled with this decision which has left him psychologically scarred. It could also be argued that his theft of the window acted as the initial cause of his deteriorating relationship with the prospect of proving up. Russell’s original story alludes to his suffering relationship through his drinking, but several times throughout the opera Mazzoli uses text painting to magnify this this. Figure 1 shows Pa’s descending sliding motion when he sings and references the stipulations for proving up in the song “The Settler’s Scar.” The entire Zegner family sings during this passage (with the exception of Peter, as he is not scored with any lines throughout the opera). Hidden within the texture of the other characters is where we find Mazzoli’s text painting for Pa’s character. While Pa outwardly explains to the members of his family that they will soon prove up, the music tells a different story. Each time one of the stipulations is sung by Pa, he sings a descending pattern which helps to explain his true feelings about proving up. The descending motion in his singing shows that Pa no longer believes his own words. He struggles with the idea of proving up, and has essentially lost hope that he will earn a title to the land that he forced his entire family to suffer with for the past five years.



Figure 1 – Pa’s descending sliding motion when singing the Homestead Act’s stipulations in measures 201-230 of “The Settler’s Scar.”

To further engrain the idea of Pa’s failing optimism, Mazzoli uses the same melodic structure later in the opera. The song “How Pa Obtained the Glass” acts as a look into Pa’s past and what potentially causes him to turn to drinking. After the audience and Miles learn that Pa stole the Yothers’ window from their farm, Pa once again sings the Homestead Act’s stipulations. Figure 2 shows Pa singing the same descending motion from earlier when referring to the stipulations. There are two distinct differences in the passage from the first one. The first is that Pa sings these stipulations twice, rather than once. This repetition of the stipulations acts as a constant reminder to not only Pa, but the audience as well, that Pa’s decision to steal the glass has caused him great inner pain. He is constantly dealing with the aftermath of his decision. The second difference is the descending motion itself. In Figure 1, Mazzoli’s decided to score Pa using vocal glissandi to “slide” down his melodic passages when singing the stipulations. This could be because he is drunk and slurring his words, but the reasoning could be argued more deeply. Figure 1 comes early in the opera, and the audience does not yet understand the full scope of how deeply tormented Pa really is by his decisions. Later, Mazzoli’s

decision to concretely specify Pa's descending melody in Figure 2, the struggles Pa is experiencing are more solidly defined for the audience.

The image shows a musical score for a vocal part (Pa) and piano accompaniment (Pno.). The vocal part is in bass clef, 4/4 time, and features a descending melody highlighted in green. The lyrics are: "He's met ev-'ry stip-u-la-tion: the house of sod... the a-cres of grain, five years of har-vest, win-dow of glass, the house of sod, a-cres of grain, five years of har-vest, win-dow of glass." The score includes dynamic markings (mf, f, mp) and performance instructions (molto accel., frantic, obsessed, fast). The piano accompaniment is in treble and bass clef, 4/4 time, and features a simple harmonic accompaniment.

Figure 2 – Pa's descending motion when singing the Homestead Act's stipulations in measures 244-250 of "How Pa Obtained the Glass."

In both Russell's original short story and Mazzoli's opera, the Inspector is a non-staged character with no lines. The Inspector is only alluded to throughout the opera by other characters. Both iterations of the story use the inspector as the personification of the Homestead Act and American government as a whole. In order for a family to finally prove up, the inspector must travel to their farm to see if the outlined stipulations have been met. Because the Inspector does not have any lines, Wasserman's question about characterization becomes far more difficult to analyze. Mazzoli's task to characterize the Inspector is solely dependent upon not how other character's describe them, but more importantly how their character arch is affected by them. Throughout the opera, the Inspector is referred to as a "rumor" and "smoke" by other characters, implying or stating outright that they are not coming or may even not exists at all. However, the audience can infer that the Inspector does exist and has come out to Nebraska at least one time. Framed in their sod house, the Yothers hung up

their land title which could only be attained after the Inspector came out to their farm.

However, there is no solid evidence throughout the opera that the inspector is returning to check the Zegner's farm. It is through the different characters' respective relationships with trying to believe that the Inspector will return that Mazzoli characterizes the Inspector.

Russell's original characters in combination with Mazzoli's text painting help illuminate the alternative negative perspective taken by this story on the American Dream. This is demonstrated through Mazzoli's decision to score different characters throughout the opera singing the word "inspector" with a descending fall. Figure 3 shows a succession of characters singing descending on the word "inspector" throughout different songs in the opera. Their descending trajectory on this word describes their respective deteriorating relationship with the struggles of proving up.

In - spec - tor.

"The Settler's Scar"
Pa - measures 233-234

the in - spec - tor.....

"Miles will Prove Up"
Pa - measures 83-84

In - spec-tor's well on his way.

"Miles will Prove Up"
Pa - measures 137-139

the In - spec-tor to our land.

"Miles will Prove Up"
Pa - measures 256-257

The In - spec - tor...

"How Pa Obtained the Glass
Older Daughter - measures 81-82

Wash-ing-ton! The In spec - tor will

"How Pa Obtained the Glass"
Ma - measures 110-111

Ma

The in-spec - tor is smoke.

"Strange Dreams"
Ma - measure 87

In spec-tor?

"Sodbuster"
Sodbuster - measure 6

Figure 3 – Respective characters' descending motion throughout the opera when singing the word "inspector."

Given the mental state of Pa throughout the opera, it should come as no surprise that four of the examples provided in Figure 3 come from him. In the first example, we see Pa use the vocal glissandi outlined earlier, to slide down on the second syllable of the word "inspector" in measures 233-234 of "The Settlers Scar." Much like with his descending motion when singing

the stipulations, Pa's later installments of singing the word "inspector" come with more defined motion. Measures 83-84 of "Miles will Prove Up," and measures 137-139 of the same song show Pa singing the same descending motion on the second syllable of the word "inspector," but these times without the glissando. The removal of the glissando once again helps solidify Pa's weakening relationship with the inspector. The last example of Pa's singing of this word weakens his relationship still further. In the previous examples, Pa sings upward on the first syllable of the word "inspector." However, in measures 256-257 of "Miles will Prove Up" Pa does not use any upward motion on the word "inspector." Pa sings exclusively with descending motion in these measures, bringing his character to arguably his lowest point in regard to his relationship with proving up.

The remaining examples from Figure 3 come from Older Daughter, Ma, and the Sodbuster respectfully. In measures 81-82 of "How Pa Obtained the Glass," Older Daughter adopts the descending glissando typically associated with Pa. Unfortunately, the Zegner daughters, who remain formally nameless throughout the opera (simply referred to as Older Daughter and Younger Daughter in the score), have since passed away after their family moved to Nebraska. Older Daughter's descending motion on the word "inspector" is representative of her and her sister's ultimate sacrifice due to her parents' decision to move out west.

Not too much later in measures 110-11 of the same song, and measure 87 of "Strange Dreams," we see Ma sing descending motion on the word inspector. Her negative relationship with the inspector is closely tied to her family's wellbeing, or lack thereof. The different levels of suffering are easily seen throughout her family. At the first and lowest level of suffering, we see Miles and Ma. Their suffering really comes at the hands of watching their loved ones

endure their personal hardships. Their family members battle mental illness, or succumbing to a premature death. The next level up for Zegner suffering is where Pa and Peter can be found. Both suffer from extreme mental deterioration. Pa suffers from internal turmoil from decisions discussed above, and Peter suffers from starvation and is quickly losing his mind. The highest level of suffering is reserved for the daughters. They unfortunately did not survive their new life out west. All of this pain and suffering by the Zegner family is represented in Ma's descending motion on the word "inspector."

In order to highlight the other characters' fading relationship with proving up through Mazzoli's text painting on the word "inspector," it is important to emphasize Miles' contrary motion on the same word. Given the macabre nature of the story, it is difficult to argue that there is a true protagonist. However, if one were to assign the title to any character, I would argue that it belongs to Miles. Miles is the younger son of the Zegner family, and despite what he sees his family going through, he remains optimistic throughout the opera. Figure 4 helps to exemplify Miles' remaining hope by singing up on the word "inspector" in measure 6 of the "Sodbuster." This comes after a wide array of problematic events. Before leaving on his journey to the Stricksels' farm to share the window, Miles' family is falling apart. During the trip, a snowstorm suddenly appears and causes him to hit his head on a low hanging branch. This hit knocks him unconscious, and he loses his horse, Nore. The example in Figure 4 are Miles' first words after he comes to and is face to face with the Sodbuster. Even though Miles has suffered through various events throughout the opera, Miles' sings an ascending motion on the word "inspector," helping to define his optimism that even though they have suffered many hardships, his family can and will prove up. Furthermore, it helps to explain the other

characters' respective negative relationships with proving up when they sing their descending melodies when referring to the inspector.

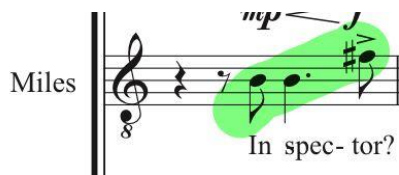


Figure 4 – Miles's upward motion on the word "inspector," showing his continued optimism.

The Sodbuster is the final character from Figure 3 that sings with descending motion on the word "inspector." The Sodbuster is a meta-physical being who embodies the hardships and dark untold truths of proving up. Miles comes face-to-face with the Sodbuster during the "Sodbuster" scene. The Sodbuster's first words are in measure 6 of this song and they are descending motion on the word "inspector." One key difference with the Sodbuster's descending motion on the word "inspector" is that it does not represent his personal relationship with the inspector. Throughout the Sodbuster scene, the audience and Miles are presented with impossible facts that the Sodbuster somehow knows about the Zegner family. He knows Miles' name without being told. He knows how Pa obtained the glass. And because the Sodbuster knows things that we as the audience know to be fact, we can deduce that his descending motion reflects the truth about the inspector. What all the other respective characters feared about the inspector, is in fact true. He is not on his way out to Nebraska to help families prove up.

As mentioned before, the Zegner daughters passed away after their family moved. In Russell's original story, they are only alluded to by other characters. They are not given any dialogue, or even names. They only exist as memories of their still living family members. In

Mazzoli’s opera however, the daughters play a far more significant role. Mazzoli stages the daughters as non-diegetic ghosts, Older Daughter (OD) and Younger Daughter (YD). In exploring Wasserman’s interview question in regards to the Zegner daughters, this decision by Mazzoli is a perfect example of how she uses her melodic text painting in her characterization choices. When OD and YD sing together, Mazzoli makes use of parallel, contrary, and oblique motion in their respective parts to provide dual meaning to the text.

Figures 5 and 6 show the daughters singing with contrary motion on the words “A house of sod” in measures 53-57 of “The Settler’s Scar,” and measures 105-112 of “Strange Dreams” respectively. Mazzoli’s use of contrary motion in this section cleverly depicts what the house of sod represents. YD sings an ascending pattern through this passage. This ascension represents the Zegner’s attempts to move out west and build a life for themselves out of nothing but what their hard work and nature provides. On the other side of that coin, OD sings a descending pattern. This descension represents the Zegner’s struggles and loss they have suffered since moving out west. Furthermore, it could be argued that this descending melody on this text is a reference to the daughters’ deaths. Digging “a house of sod” could figuratively mean that the daughters were digging their own graves.

The image shows a musical score for three parts: Y.D. (Younger Daughter), O.D. (Older Daughter), and Pno. (Piano). The score is for measures 53-57. The Y.D. part is in the upper staff, and the O.D. part is in the middle staff. Both parts are marked with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The lyrics for both parts are "A house a house of sod,". The Y.D. part features an ascending melodic line, while the O.D. part features a descending melodic line, illustrating contrary motion. The piano accompaniment is in the lower staff, featuring a steady rhythmic pattern with chords. The score is written in a key signature of one flat (B-flat major or D minor) and a 4/4 time signature.

Figure 5 – The Zegner daughter’s contrary motion in measures 53-57 of “The Settler’s Scar.”

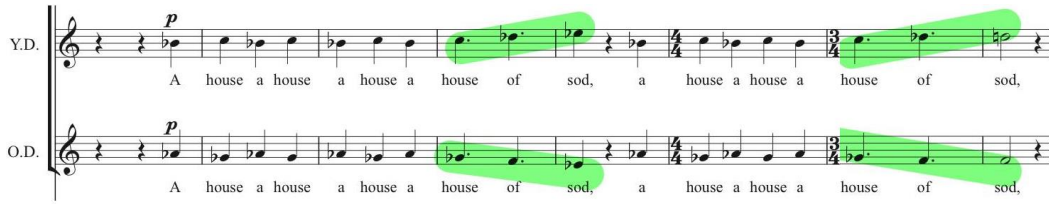


Figure 6 – The Zegner daughters’ contrary motion in measures 105-112 of “Strange Dreams.”

Figure 7 shows OD and YD singing in oblique motion in measures 288-290 of “The Settler’s Scar.”⁵ OD starts singing on an E and ends on an E, which provides no motion up or down. OD’s statement of “farmers need to look out for farmers” is a literal reference to the Zegner’s plan to share the glass window with other neighboring families so that they can prove up as well. Mazzoli’s lack of motion in OD’s melody helps to remove any subtext from this line. The interest then comes from YD’s descending motion. By having YD sing the same text but with descending motion, Mazzoli has helped provide a deeper meaning to the text. A glass window is hard to come by, and is something that is highly coveted. YD’s statement of “farmers need to look out for farmers” refers to Pa stealing the Yothers’ glass window. Now that the Zegner’s have a window, farmers may be inclined to steal the window or even be willing to kill for it.

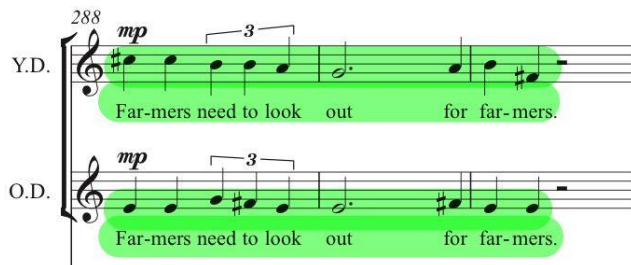


Figure 7 – The Zegner daughter’s oblique motion in measures 288-290 of “The Settler’s Scar.”

⁵ The oblique motion is in reference to their respective starting and end notes only. YD starts on a C-sharp and ultimately descends to an F-sharp. OD starts on an E and ends on the same note.

Figure 8 shows the Zegner daughters singing in parallel motion in measures 296-300 of “The Settler’s Scar.” Both daughters have a descending pattern.⁶ They both sing “Pa’s got the scar. The settler’s scar.” The parallel descending motion means that both daughters are assigned a negative meaning to the text. Literally, the line “the settler’s scar” is referring to the physical scar on Pa’s hand from years of manual labor working on the farm. However, there is also a psychological scarring that Pa has endured as well. Moving his family out west, seeing his eldest son start to lose his mind, the death of his daughters, and stealing the Yothers’ window has taken a deep psychological toll on Pa. It remains unclear as to which of the Zegner daughters is assigned the literal or figurative meaning during this passage, but given the parallel motion it could be either one of them.

The image displays two staves of musical notation. The top staff is labeled 'JSSO' and 'ff' (fortissimo). The bottom staff is labeled 'PP' (pianissimo). Both staves show a descending melodic line across four measures. The lyrics 'Pa's got the scar. The settler's scar.' are written below the notes. The notes are highlighted in green, and the lyrics are also highlighted in green. The time signature changes from 3/4 to 2/2 in the second measure.

Figure 8 – The Zegner daughters’ similar motion in measures 296-300 of “The Settler’s Scar.”

The articles written and interviews conducted with Mazzoli regarding her gender and the role she plays as champion of twenty-first century opera are important. However, what makes Mazzoli’s adaptation of *Proving Up* more significant pertains more to the musical content than anything to with her gender. *Proving Up* is a story that highlights the darker side of the “American Dream” that often gets overlooked and forgotten, and Mazzoli helps give life

⁶ The descending motion only refers to their start and end notes. YD starts on a G-sharp and ends on an F-sharp. OD starts on an F-sharp and ends on an E.

to this theme through her musical choices throughout her opera. Wasserman's interview provided a great jumping off point in reviewing Mazzoli's methods of characterization, but it failed to follow up through musical analysis. Through studying Mazzoli's text painting of Pa's deteriorating mental state and relationship with proving up, the respective characters' relationships with the Inspector, and the dual meanings provided by the Zegner daughters, we can see that she propels Russell's already morose version of this theme to a more haunting level. Hopefully, the genius of Mazzoli's writing can begin to be discussed more deeply with the help of this text painting analysis.

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