Turtleneck Project:

Mike Fan & Tanya Smania

Mike Fan:

1) How can a human being be beautiful?

Beauty is truth and authenticity to me. So many of us walk around with secrets and self-doubts. Isn't it so much more beautiful to live a life embracing who we are, what we are truly passionate about - loving and giving without fear of being hurt? I spent so much of my life afraid to live my truth and to love myself - whether in terms of my identity as a visible minority, musician, second-generation immigrant, queer, or gender non-binary. Bullying and discrimination certainly didn't help.

However, when I finally came to a point when it was unbearable living an unhappy life hiding from my truth, I had to flip the switch and start living each day for myself. Life since is so much more beautiful. It flows so much more naturally once I relinquished that perceived need to conform. My energy began to draw in the people and experiences truly resonant to me. So, when I think of beauty, it isn't simply a physical feature. It's that freedom of someone totally being themselves and living a life full of the things that truly excite them. That kind of beauty radiates from the inside out and is truly irresistible.

2) Tell me a story about someone who is beautiful to you.

I had the great joy of meeting a friend online from France during 2020. She tuned into my first recital that I performed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Her virtual presence meant a lot to me since no live audience was allowed in the hall with my pianist and I. Moreover, she took the time to write me a beautiful email afterwards. It remains one of the most heartfelt and special messages that I have ever received. Rather than simply praising my voice and the music which is all lovely - I felt that she truly "saw" me. She understood and appreciated the sensitivity, emotion, and commitment that my pianist and I brought to our interpretations - through this story of love, loss, and family that I wanted to tell through my voice, the repertoire I chose, and the visual backdrop. To be seen, understood, and appreciated exactly who we are as humans, artists, and creators - that to me is beauty. And then for someone to articulate it so well and authentically - what a gift! It is so important

to me to treasure these moments of connection and truth, particularly given what we have all experienced during the momentous year that was 2020. Despite being all the way around the world in France, 6 hours apart, during a worldwide pandemic - isn't it miraculous that we can still make new connections, share art with each other, and connect in a profound way? That's truly beautiful to me.

3) What do you like about yourself?

I like my smile and laugh! I have an open, infectious laugh and my silly, goofy side emerges when I am truly relaxed and joyful. At the same time, there is also a side to me that is deep, dark, and serious. I have been through so much - but haven't we all? Smiling and laughter doesn't mean that we ignore the pain and loss in our lives. To me, those moments define us and teach us so much about ourselves. To be able to smile and laugh throughout moments of challenge means that we continue to heal, learn, and grow - and find the beauty through the darkness. There is always beauty, there is always possibility even when it seems like there isn't. That is the truth that continues to reveal itself to me time and time again in the most miraculous of ways even in the deepest moments of despair.

Tanya Smania:

1) How can a human being be beautiful?

A beautiful human is raw. When you look in her eyes: you can see her power, her hurt, her confidence, her insecurities, her joys, her pains. When she is an open to the world but one knows there is so much more simmering beneath the surface that is unsaid, tantalizing.

2) Tell me a story about someone who is beautiful to you.

Tatyana Larina is my favourite opera role. I was named for this heroine of the Pushkin novel and Tchaikovsky opera *Eugene Onegin*. She begins her journey as a shy, bookish girl. After Onegin coldly rejects her, she marries into nobility. Despite her humble origins, she finally taps into her personal and moral power by the end of the opera. She refuses to take back Onegin as a married woman, even after he realizes the error of his ways. Tatyana

is beauty to me - intelligent, passionate, unwavering. It is honour for me to carry forth her name and to be a diva in her image.

3) What do you like about yourself?

The eyes - when the beholder looks into my eyes, what do they see? Power, pain - beauty, sadness - joy, vengeance. What is the truth? As a diva of the stage and theatre, I hone my craft so that I portray what I want the audience to see, what the creator of the work wants to express. Yet my truth - my vulnerability, my softness, this comes through also as well as the strength. Perhaps only I myself know truly what lies in my heart. But the eyes, they tell our story, the truth - whether or not we are ready for it to surface.