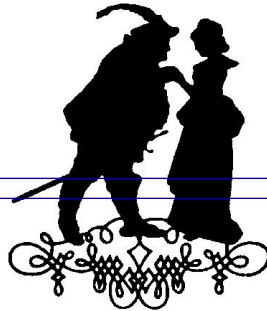


Opera con Brio

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A Journey to *Cold Mountain*

Santa Fe Opera, 2015 Festival Season



The Santa Fe Opera House

Photo: Peter Oglive

The 2015 season at Santa Fe Opera included an entertaining mix of four operas by four familiar composers of opera: a dark and powerful production of Verdi's *Rigoletto*; a comedy-filled romp through Donizetti's evergreen *opéra comique* *The Daughter of the Regiment*; a Freud-inspired *Salome*, a nod to the company's rich tradition of Strauss; and a sparkling early Mozart rarity, *La Finta Giardiniera*. This might seem

enough for most companies, but not for one such as Santa Fe Opera, which has so admirably built much of its reputation over almost sixty years on world premieres and newly commissioned works. The latest of these was this season's offering, Jennifer Higdon's debut opera, *Cold Mountain*, based on Charles Frazier's debut novel of 1997. The opera was the most anticipated event of the season. Happily, it did not disappoint, and it became as much a hit as the award-winning novel, so much so that an extra performance had to be added to compensate for the great demand for tickets.

Men ask the way to Cold Mountain.

Cold Mountain: there's no through trail.

This quotation opens the second poem of *Words from Cold Mountain*, the twenty-seven poems by the 9th century Chinese poet and recluse who called himself Han-shan ("Cold Mountain"). The words also preface Frazier's 450 page novel, a work that traces the arduous journey of a wounded Confederate soldier, W. P. Inman, as he makes his 300 mile trek back home to Cold

Mountain in the Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina and to his beloved Ada Monroe. The first image awaiting the audience in the refreshing open air of the Santa Fe Opera House is that of the fixed set for the opera, some twenty-seven rough wooden planks crisscrossing each other like a dark three dimensional pile of giant pick-up-sticks. The first impression: there is no through trail.

Looking through the wide-open back of the stage, as the sun set across the vast mesas of New Mexico toward the distant, faded-blue Jemez mountains, I couldn't help but be reminded next of the opening chapter to Frazer's novel (which I had re-read during the summer). The narrative shifts focus, through the window of Inman's imagination, from the confines of a Confederate hospital to "the low green ridges terracing up to the vast hump of Cold Mountain.... There in the highlands, clear weather held for much of the time. The air lacked its usual haze, and the view stretched on and on across rows of blue mountains, each paler than the last until the final ranks were indistinguishable from the sky. It was as if all the world might be composed of nothing but valley and ridge." Thus begins Inman's escape to the fresh air and freedom of Cold Mountain.



Nathan Gunn as Inman; Isabel Leonard as Ada
Photo: Ken Howard

The setting, and the set, proved a microcosm for the masterful transformation of this sprawling image-filled novel to stage. The novel is constructed with frequent flashbacks, a myriad of unsavory characters, and a



The Sirens (Megan Marino, Hether Phillips, Shabnam Kalbasi, and Bridgette Gan);
Nathan Gunn as Inman
Photo: Ken Howard

narrative technique that constantly alternates between the world of the two leading characters, Inman and Ada, until they finally reconnect. How to telescope all this into a mere three-hour opera? Credit naturally goes first to the composer and her experienced librettist, Gene Scheer, whose prior experience adapting *Moby-Dick* for the Dallas Opera was invaluable. But much credit belongs also to director Leonard Foglia who used scenic designer Robert Brill's intricate jumble of planks in most imaginative ways, not only as a maze-like landscape for Inman's modern *Odyssey* through his encounters with a slew of Homeric characters, including a bevy of playful sirens, but also as various props facilitating his journey – a weapon, a bridge, a paddle, and so on. The selective lighting of Brian Nisson contributed immensely to the effect of the scheme, thus avoiding confusion that might have ensued from the various shifting perspectives.

Still, the success of any opera depends on the musical forces, composer and performers alike; it depends, in short, on how well the music articulates the drama (to borrow Joseph Kerman's familiar phrase). This is not

always easy to measure in a new work, and Ms. Higdon, an award winning composer writing her first opera, rooted in a more traditional compositional language, has already received both praise and criticism for this score – views so antithetical it is hard to imagine writers are focusing on the same piece. An article which appeared at the end of the summer by critic David Patric Stearns, “New operas highlight a longstanding divide,” artfully summarizes the problem:

If music is the universal language it’s often proclaimed to be, why has nothing close to a consensus emerged on the two high-profile opera openings of the summer? Whether *Written on Skin* at New York’s Mostly Mozart Festival [the British composer George Benjamin’s recent sensational hit] or *Cold Mountain* at the Santa Fe Opera, reviews have been so polarized that one side is often baffled by the viewpoint of the other.... The division is emblematic of a continuing split between composers who draw from such past tonal composers as Samuel Barber and those arising from a more recent modernist [dissonant] past. *Cold Mountain* belongs to the former and *Written on Skin* to the latter.

My handicap was that I attended *Cold Mountain* in Santa Fe just two days after attending *Written on Skin* in New York. The juxtaposition indeed proved a barrier at first to my ability to hear past the surface of *Cold Mountain*’s sometimes-folksy music. The opera has no overture but opens with one character, Teague, the relentless and brutal hunter of deserters, slowly emerging from the dimly-lit planks, singing an *a cappella* ballad: “Peaches in the summertime, apples in the fall. If I can’t have me that girl, I don’t want none at all.” It all seemed threadbare at first, after the brittle *Written on Skin*, and the ensuing music with its neo-Romantic tinta inadequate for the subject matter at hand – too sentimental, too cautious in tone and color. I was taken with the set and with the imaginative ways the director could manipulate collection of rough-hewn wooden planks, but less so with much of the music.

All this changed with a second hearing four nights later. Rather than seeming the product of a neophyte composer of opera, Ms. Higdon’s score came through as something more on the level of her award-winning orchestral pieces, for example, her lively Violin Concerto that won the Pulitzer Prize for music in 2010 or her Percussion Concerto that won a Grammy the same year – the kind of music that served some of the more tension-filled moments well in *Cold Mountain*. But mostly, it was another quality in the music that so effectively illuminated the human moments of the extended drama, a quality Ms. Higdon herself once highlighted in commenting on a goal in her compositions: “Make sure the music communicates...i.e., make sure to make music that speaks not only to the serious professional performers, but also the audiences [of all types].”

Indeed the idiom of *Cold Mountain* is music that communicates, music that for the most part draws one in, rather than pushes one away (as with *Written on Skin*). Vocal lines that had at first seemed a little too sentimental or overly nostalgic, now seemed “packed with information,” to borrow an insight from Mr. Stearns. And I couldn’t agree more with his sentiment that while the opening *a cappella* scene might have seemed threadbare at first, with familiarity it became “something direct and penetrating,” with the grimly ironic images of child-like innocence spilling out from the villainous Teague. So



Emily Fons (Ruby Thewes); Jay Hunter Morris (Teague)
Photo: Ken Howard

too the opera itself came through as a work of poignant and penetrating directness, not simply in moments of lyrical effusion but also in the plentiful *parlando* that let Mr. Sheer's carefully sculpted text come through with such clarity and force. In the same vein, the occasional chorale-like choruses that pepper the score at important junctures - especially the chorus of dead soldiers near the end singing of their "beautiful country...buried and forgotten," create a poignant balance to the deceptively simple opening of the opera.

"For me, music is about emotion," stated Ms. Higdon speaking of this opera. "That's the first thing I think about when I'm writing. So I'm hoping that people who come to the opera, who know the novel, will identify with the characters and understand. I mean, it's a slice of time, it's a slice of life. It's a regional slice, and it's characters who could very well be living now - so it's an audio portrait." These "slices" also included occasional carefully-crafted *ariosos* from various soloists as well as timely ensembles, from the loving duet of discovery for Ada and Inman, to a Brittenesque quintet from the principals on the futility of it all.



Emily Fons as Ruby Thewes Photo: Ken Howard



Isabel Leonard (Ada; Nathan Gunn (Inman) Photo: Ken Howard

A fine cast greatly enhanced the realization of these portraits, notably Isabel Leonard as the well-bred lady turned self-sufficient farmer Ada Monroe and Emily Fons as her feisty friend Ruby Thewes. It was probably no accident this pair of mezzos assumed the roles of two determined women, for each has excelled in such sharply edged mezzo roles as those of Rossini's spunky heroine Rosina, for example, or Cenerentola. Ms. Fons, whom I reviewed as the vibrant trouser lead in Handel's *Faramondo* two years ago at the Göttingen Handel Festival, was also recently highlighted in the October *Opera News* feature, "Rising Stars." She seemed especially well suited to catch the essence of Frazier's Ruby. As she commented in this article, "I felt an affinity to Ruby immediately. She is self-sufficient, proactive, tireless, direct and confident, but not standoffish or harsh."

Baritone Nathan Gunn, so well known for his poignant portrayal of Billy Budd, certainly brought the experience of this role (among others) to his staunch portrayal of the meditative yet bedeviled Inman. Rounding out the principals, tenor Jay Hunter Morris remained a convincing nemesis throughout the evening. Others in the supporting cast also punctuated Inman's trek with effective vignettes: tenor Roger Honeywell as the lecherous, hypocritical preacher Solomon Veasey; bass Kevin Burdette providing a welcome bit of comic relief as Ruby's wayward pappy, Stobrod Thewes (early on he was also double cast as an entirely different persona, A Blind Man); and mezzo Deborah Nansteel as an escaped slave, Lucinda, who sings a poignant duet with Inman lamenting their parallel plights.



Deborah Nansteel (Lucinda); Nathan Gunn (Inman); Chorus
Photo: Ken Howard

Again, how can a lengthy, down-home, image-rich novel translate to the operatic stage? Not easily. A mistake is to judge the success of one (a word-centered novel, with its own conventions of narrative technique and structure) against the other (a music-centered opera with its own conventions, and restrictions of time and space). Music articulates the drama to be sure, but it is usually a drama of a very different sort from its literary source. In Verdi's *Otello*, music articulates Boito's drama, not Shakespeare's. Judged as a depiction of Shakespeare's play, Verdi and Boito (his expert librettist) fall short. Where is the study of Iago's motivation? Reduced to a vindictive "credo!" Yet *Otello*, judged as an opera, is truly masterful, one of the best written. Thus judging the transformation of *Cold Mountain* we must

bear the same thing in mind; the merit of an opera, as opera, is not a measure of how "true" it is to the source. The lingering, brooding intensity of Inman in the richly imaged narrative of the novel is quite different from the more robust character we see on stage. As Frazier says of his character, "Inman is such an internal character. To see him on stage singing took a little bit of adjustment."

The rich orchestral palate of Ms. Higdon, skillfully realized by conductor Miguel Harth-Bedoya, goes a long way to draw us in to the drama and to the inner world of the characters. Again, as she commented, music is about emotion: "I'm hoping that people who come to the opera, who know the novel, will identify with the characters and understand." The essence of her vocabulary is the warmth, and the engaging if occasionally sentimental immediacy of this empathy with the characters. Her idiom is not that of the novel, rich in its own layered narrative and expanded imagery, – nor does it evoke the cold, brittle distancing from the subject that the more radical non-tonal idiom of a work like *Written on Skin* inhabits. Her engaging work travels next to Opera Philadelphia and Minnesota Opera, which co-commissioned and co-produced the work in collaboration with North Carolina Opera. Catch it if you can – even if you have already done so in Santa Fe. Repeated encounters will help; there is indeed a trail to Cold Mountain, and the journey is worth it.



The Ensemble for *Cold Mountain*

Photo: Ken Howard