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CRITICAL WRITING BY MARY KATHLEEN ERNST

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A Week of Festivals Featuring Women Composers: Judith Shatin's *Glyph* and Jennifer Higdon's *Cold Mountain*

This past August, I had the good fortune in a single week to hear Judith Shatin's *Glyph* at the Aspen Music Festival (Colorado) and Jennifer Higdon's first opera, *Cold Mountain*, a world premiere production commissioned by The Santa Fe Opera (New Mexico).

Aspen Mountain was lush and green from higher than usual summer rainfall. During a visit to the spectacular Maroon Bells peaks and Maroon Lake, the clouds broke just long enough for a peek at the peaks, the most photographed in North America. Their reflection in the crystal clear lake below, with the sky's dramatic thunderheads in the background, was an unforgettable sight.

That evening, I attended a chamber concert at Harris Concert Hall performed by faculty and students of the Aspen Music School in a well-constructed program including three major works sharing great virtuosity, rich textural effects, and emotional depth: Faure's Piano Quartet No. 2, Brahms' Sonata No. 1 for Viola and Piano, and Shatin's *Glyph* (1984) for Viola, Strings and Piano, with faculty artist James Dunham as soloist. Although it was composed thirty-one years ago, *Glyph* is still fresh, inventive, and deserving of the many performances it has garnered. A glyph is a carved relief and refers to "the carving of sound in relief through time and on oneself," according to the composer.

In concerto-like form, its four movements evoke different qualities of light. "Luminous" displays sustained, gossamer sound colors against the solo viola's warm, lyrical lines. "Flickering" is a fast, fantastical interchange between instruments that ends all too soon in a flurry of pizzicato that vanishes into thin air. "Ecstatic" showcased Dunham's voluptuous sound in the romantic solo lines, embellished by crystalline glissandi in the piano. "Incandescent" implies a white-hot, fiery light.

Here, there were impassioned exchanges between instruments, followed by a virtuosic viola cadenza. With increasing intensity and driving rhythms, the movement Concert and Opera Reviews 29 whirled to a close, eliciting an enthusiastic ovation from the audience. James Dunham is the featured violist in *Glyph* with the Cassatt Quartet in *Time to Burn*, a recent CD of Judith Shatin's music on the Innova label (reviewed in this issue). A new version



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of *Glyph* for solo viola, string orchestra, and piano was premiered by violist Emily Onderdonk and the San Jose Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Barbara Day Turner, on March 1, 2015.

From Aspen, I flew to Santa Fe, arriving at its Sunport on a hot, sunny afternoon in the New Mexico desert. The whole city seemed to be buzzing about *Cold Mountain*, from my Hertz representative at the airport to guests at my hotel and visitors to the Georgia O'Keefe Museum. Tourists from around the U.S., Canada, Europe, and as far away as Australia had come to experience the opera in one of the most spectacular open-air venues in the world.

Taking my seat in the front mezzanine, I saw breathtaking views over hundreds of miles from the high bluff where the opera shed sits, open on three sides, looking out over an expansive, golden desert valley framed by distant mountains. As the sun set and the sky reflected vivid oranges, blues, and violets, my focus moved to the stage and the striking set, composed of huge timbers jutting out in all directions over a massive pile of wood and stony rubble, lit completely in black. It was a harsh and depressing sight, as if symbolizing the destruction of a country, a society, a way of life, a generation of young men. It reflected the darkness inherent in the tragic story about to unfold.

The opera *Cold Mountain* is based on Charles Frazier's National Book Award-winning novel. Composed by Jennifer Higdon with a libretto by Gene Scheer, it is a story of life, love, loss, and survival based on real characters living in the South during the U.S. Civil War. The story takes place over years 1861 to 1864. W.P. Inman (Nathan Gunn), an experienced soldier (and ancestor of Mr. Frazier), has grown tired and disillusioned after four years of fighting a war he believed would last only six months. Wounded, he decides to leave the army and walk home to his beloved Ada Monroe (Isabel Leonard), whom he plans to marry. Ada is a well-educated woman of privilege from Charleston, South Carolina who is trying to survive alone on Black Cove Farm. Along comes Ruby (Emily Fons), a strong, able woman who has survived on her own since childhood, who offers to help Ada tend the farm. Together they form a strong bond—Ada teaching Ruby how to read and write—Ruby teaching Ada how to repair fences, slaughter chickens, grow food, and hunt. Teague (Jay Hunter Morris), the nefarious head of the Confederate Home Guard, is hotly pursuing Stobrod (Kevin Burdette), Ruby's father and a deserter.

The trail leads to Black Cove Farm and ultimately to Inman. Although Inman is a capable soldier, he is also a good-hearted man, who stops along the way home to rest and often help those in need. Gene Scheer's vivid libretto provided deep insights into the novel's main characters and inspired Pulitzer prize-winning composer Jennifer Higdon's magnificent music. Re-scripted scenes from Frazier's long, detailed novel were masterfully condensed into



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two concise acts of descriptive prose and moving poetry. Higdon's orchestral writing embodies musical architecture on a grand scale. In each act the well-crafted and controlled music reached a tumultuous peak. Rhythms were punctuated to underscore the English diction and propel the action forward. Every word sung was clearly understood, with natural inflection and flow.

A wide variety of orchestral textures and unique harmonies never interfered with the singers but fortified dramatic action, enlivened characters, and created compelling moods. Conductor Miguel Harth-Bedoya deserved kudos for maintaining flawless ensemble and support of the singers throughout.

The opera opens in silence, interrupted only by a few men in a far corner shoveling black dirt, perhaps burying a fallen soldier. Teague, a heartless, vengeful brute, bursts on stage to capture and shoot deserters. Brash winds in the lowest registers blew stabbing, sharp and dissonant tones, portraying the evil antagonist.

Opera superstar Nathan Gunn infused Inman's first aria with haunting hollowness and great sensitivity. He sang of the horrors and fatigue of battle, sleeping among dead soldiers, consuming only broth and bread. He decries war, singing, "The Metal Age has come!" "Oh, there was nothing poetic, nothing as pure as a drop of water, just bile and stench...." As Inman journeyed, long lines of unresolved descending harmonies in the orchestra portended trials to come.

Leonard and Fons delivered outstanding performances that perfectly embodied two remarkably different characters. As Ada, Isabel Leonard's pure, clear sound portrayed Ada's elegance, refinement and innocence. Emily Fons put forth a hefty, authoritative and sometimes guttural tone to show Ruby's strength, life experience, candor, and humor.

The singers moved up, down, and across the many angled planks that effectively showed scenes happening simultaneously in different geographic locations. Spotlighting kept the most important action in the forefront. Staging and lighting made it possible to show multiple lives lived at different progressions—Teague's fast pursuit of deserters, Inman's varied pace on his journey home, and the slower pace of Ada and Ruby's day to day life on Black Cove Farm.

Higdon's lush choral writing was a highlight throughout, and a touching elegy in the second act was particularly moving. The vocal ensemble singing was another high point, particularly the vocal quartet, "A Fence is a Good Thing," which featured personal life reflections of Teague, Stobrod, Ada, and Ruby. The Home Guard's killing of Inman after a brief encounter with Ada, who was hunting in the woods, completes the tragic story. The audience's



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ovation was spontaneous. Morris was enthusiastically booed for his commanding Isabel Leonard (Ada) and Emily Fons (Ruby) in Jennifer Higdon's performance of Teague. Fons received shouts and whistles for her performance as Ruby, probably the opera's most complex and captivating character.

Cold Mountain portrays undoubtedly the most devastating period in United States history, that of its Civil War, in which over 600,000 Americans were killed, more Americans than in any other conflict worldwide since. Music, text, direction, and lighting all served to create a special intimacy between characters and audience, while remaining true to the history passed down to novelist Frazier's family through stories and letters from Inman.

There have been a number of important and successful contemporary operas about events in history. Among those that come to mind are many by Philip Glass including Satyagraha, The Voyage, Akhnaten, Galileo Galilei, and Apomattox, Thea Musgrave's Mary Queen of Scots, Tan Dun's The First Emperor, and John Adams' Nixon in China. Jennifer Higdon's Cold Mountain may someday be counted among these. If you miss the opportunity to attend upcoming performances in Minnesota, Philadelphia, or North Carolina, The Santa Fe Opera has recorded it for distribution in the near future.

Cold Mountain was co-commissioned and co-produced by Opera Philadelphia and Minnesota Opera, in collaboration with North Carolina Opera, directed by Leonard Foglia, set design by Robert Brill, and lighting design by Brian Nason.

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