OPERA NEWS

Cold Mountain

SANTA BARBARA, CA
Music Academy of the West
8/4/19

WITH EIGHTEEN NAMED CHARACTERS in the principal cast, Jennifer Higdon's 2015 opera *Cold Mountain* is an excellent vehicle for the Music Academy of the West to show off its deep bench of talented 2019 vocal fellows (seen Aug. 4). While a couple of the singers made strong individual impressions, this cast shone brightest in ensemble passages, where Higdon's vocal writing is at its most effective and the cast's strong collective sound produced beautifully blended harmonies.

Higdon's first opera, this 2015 work still feels bloated, stretched from squeezing too much plot and too many characters into an opera that doesn't always maintain narrative drive. But in this new production designed by François-Pierre Couture and directed by James Darrah, *Cold Mountain*'s disjointed plot was presented with heightened clarity.

Projection designer Adam Larsen's shadowy, black-and-white projections helped, effectively morphing one large "room" into easily discernible locales like a battlefield or farmyard, mountain cave or cabin interior. Props were limited to a few easily moveable chairs and wooden boxes, stark dangling tree branches and an impressive mound of mulch. Piled into one corner, this messy hill of earthy black dirt provided believably rough terrain for heroes to stumble across. With the addition of a few projected trees and hillsides, it morphed into the blackened slope of a distant Cold Mountain.

Set in deep Appalachia in the 1860s, this opera requires cast members to adopt at least a little twang or drawl. Luckily this cast largely nailed their singing accents, widening long vowels strategically but never slipping into silly parody. But whether it was because of the addition of the southern accent or the demands of the score and libretto, both female leads struggled to clearly articulate text, especially in high ranges.

Soprano Anneliese Klenetsky, who played the always pining and evolving Ada, spun frothy high notes that floated delicately in the theater but were completely devoid of articulation, leaving words unrecognizable but for the aid of supertitles. Mezzo-soprano Talin Nalbandian struggled similarly as Ruby, especially in her upper ranges, and both female leads were unconvincing actresses.

Baritone Evan Bravos, on the other hand, brought vitality, consistently clear diction and a booming voice and personality to Inman, the confederate deserter who is the object of Ada's affection and longing.

Handsome in its middle and low ranges and charming up high, Bravos' big voice brought energy to the stage, although it was at times applied with a too-heavy hand; some delicacy to balance out the booming intensity would have given his character a more nuanced reading. Unfortunately Higdon's writing for the character of Inman placed Bravos' voice too-often in a tricky place for him vocally, the wobbly spot between his booming mid-range and soaring falsetto tenor. But when he sang in his sweet spots, his voice was seductive.

Among *Cold Mountain*'s myriad supporting characters, sopranos Samantha Rose Williams and Magdalena Kuzma were standouts as the powerful slave Lucinda and the conniving, sensual Lila. Kuzma's voice stood out musically and dramatically in the production. She was on stage for only a brief scene, but it was long enough to convey star quality, and leave the audience wanting to hear more. —*Catherine Elaine Womack*