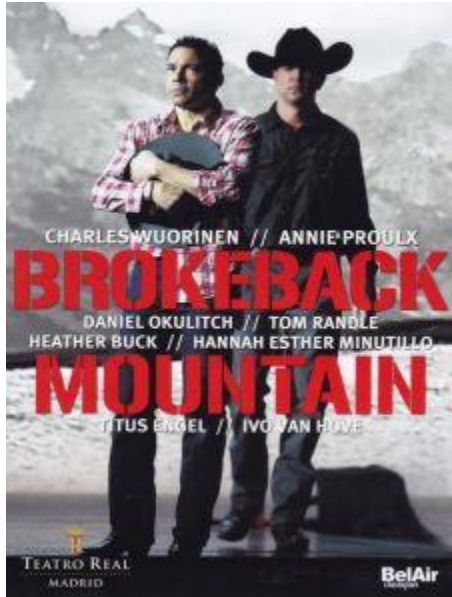


GRAMOPHONE

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WUORINEN *Brokeback Mountain*



Few short stories have become so quickly and so deeply embedded in the American consciousness as Annie Proulx's 1997 *Brokeback Mountain*. First published in *The New Yorker* and made into a critically acclaimed 2005 movie, it now animates a starkly modernist opera by Charles Wuorinen, premiered last year at Madrid's Teatro Real. The characters, and the bleak storyline, now operate almost at the level of myth: we know the narrative arc, the tragic conclusion, even the symbols and speaking tics that define the two cowboys, whose doomed love plays out over decades against the relentlessly hostile backdrop of the conservative American west.

The opera, commissioned by Gerard Mortier and premiered only weeks before his death, received mixed but respectful reviews at its premiere. This DVD makes a strong case both for the original production (by Ivo van Hove) and for the opera itself. The music isn't blithely charismatic like so many contemporary American operas today, and it owes far more to Schoenberg and Berg than to Britten, Bernstein or Copland. If Wuorinen hadn't expressed interest in setting it to music years ago, it would likely have become yet another pastiche-filled work, passed around the regional opera circuit, where its main virtue would have been to offend no one.

Wuorinen's setting reminds one of Monteverdi – formal, stately and psychologically precise, with spare and often angular vocal lines set against prismatic bursts from the orchestra; the accompaniment oscillates between two basic ideas: hushed, sustained figures that suggest the influence of Debussy, and expressionist, often nervous outbursts. The impact is cumulative, by design: the characters, especially the painfully laconic Ennis del Mar (sung by bass-baritone Daniel Okulitch), spend much of the opera groping their way towards self-knowledge and open expression. When Okulitch finally gets there, in the final scenes, he gives a magnificent and deeply powerful performance, capturing all the despair and self-recrimination that makes Proulx's original story so affecting.

Almost equally engaging is tenor Tom Randle, as Jack Twist, who plays the more self-aware and the more directly lyrical of the two lovers. Jane Henschel has a few short but strikingly humane passages as Jack's mother; Ryan MacPherson, as her husband, convincingly depicts the violence and bitterness of Jack's father. Under the baton of Titus Engel, the Teatro Real orchestra almost disappears into the proceedings, like a crack continuo ensemble in a Baroque drama.

It may be difficult to decide how much Wuorinen's music adds to Proulx's words. It was a masterstroke to ask the original author to write the libretto, which is a free-standing work of literature, both amplifying the original story and adding specifically operatic elements, including a ghost scene and a brutally effective chorus. But in the end, the opera feels like a genuine collaboration, allowing Okulitch especially to carry his doomed character into a different expressive realm than the story or the movie. His Ennis emerges as an Orpheus for a new age of love and loss.

–Philip Kennicott