

WUORINEN Brokeback Mountain • Titus Engel, cond; Tom Randle (Jack Twist); Daniel Okulitch (Ennis del Mar); Heather Buck (Alma); Hannah Esther Minutillo (Lureen); Teatro Real Madrid 0 & Ch • BELAIR 411 (Blu-ray: 130:00) Madrid 2/2014

Brokeback Mountain is an award-winning short story by Annie Proulx, who then wrote the libretto (she did not write the screenplay for Ang Lee's 2005 Hollywood film). Charles Wuorinen's music is hard and spare, as befits the story and its setting, a Wyoming mountain that "kills men," represented by thundering timpani and double basses howling on low C. Ennis del Mar (bass-baritone) is an introverted loner with a quick temper who remains a ne'er-do-well cowboy. Jack Twist (tenor) is a fast-talking rodeo rider who becomes a successful salesman in a family business. Alone together on the mountain, tending sheep for an entire summer, the two young men ("Neither of them was twenty") end up having sex. They part at the end of summer; each gets married and has children before they meet again, four years later. They realize they love each other; Ennis worries about what he has become; Jack glories in it. The affair goes on for 20 years of occasional meetings; they argue and fight just as they do with their wives. Alma divorces Ennis; Jack suffers what his wife Lureen calls a freak roadside accident, but Ennis thinks that he was murdered by homophobes. Truly alone now, Ennis can only say "Jack, I swear...." In the opera, that is extended into an aria. The wives suffer, too, but they are each able to get on with life. Alma marries the reliable Bill; Lureen runs her firm.

The opera sticks close to the short story, often word for word. A few scenes with the wives have been added or opened up to give female voices some balance in the music: Alma and her mother pick out a wedding gown in a dress shop. Lureen's deceased father visits her in a dream, hinting that Jack has been messing with men. There are extended versions of marital arguments. The story is treasured for its flowing, flowery language, which describes the scenes and the characters, while the men speak a simple cowboy patois. They say almost nothing about their first sexual encounter, or about their eventual realization of love. That won't work in an opera, so their inner feelings are expressed in soliloquy, which makes Proulx's presence as librettist especially important. It is something of a paradox that Wuorinen's appropriately somber, 12-tone music brightens for spirited, lively scenes which are mostly arguments. Vocal lines can be bit crabbed, constrained as much by the in-the-closet emotional situation as by any dodecaphonic strictures. Composing an earlier opera on a flamboyant, fanciful novel (Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*), Wuorinen wrote brilliant, colorful music, but that would not have suited Brokeback Mountain.

This Madrid production fits the opera well. Bare sets, minimal props: two tents, a little furniture; projected backdrops of mountains and sheep, or nothing at all, mere blackness. Horses are absent. The direction is natural—verismo—with no hint of Regietheater. Both leads do what they can with their music and are convincing actors; so are the women, who sympathetically convey the wives' marital frustrations.

In the 20-minute bonus, the author/librettist notes that Wyoming is a very homophobic state, and that the brief chorus has been added to reflect that situation, hovering over Ennis as he learns of Jack's death. The booklet says that the late director of Teatro Real, Gerard Mortier, commissioned Brokeback Mountain for that house, but he tells us that it was originally intended for the (now also deceased) New

York City Opera. Mortier calls the film sentimental; Proulx says it is a surface skim, that the opera has more psychological depth. Wuorinen says that the film's beautiful cinematography shows a welcoming, beckoning landscape, but the truth is that, while beautiful, Wyoming's landscape is also very threatening, very dangerous. The conductor points out that the introverted Ennis expresses himself only in Sprechgesang at first, only later being able to sing, whereas Jack is comfortable with his dodecaphonic line from the beginning. The two leads tell us how difficult it was to find suitable actions to represent their characters.

Audio is PCM Stereo or DTS HD Master Audio 5.1. Video is BD50, 1080i HD, colour [I'm blindly quoting the package], 16:9. The opera is sung in English, with or without subtitles in English, French, or Spanish. Video and audio quality are excellent, but the grim mountain settings and generally nighttime scenes suggest watching in a darkened room.

The subject is nothing new to literature, but it made the film famous—infamous if you will. Nor is homosexuality new to opera, but the realism of *Brokeback Mountain* may make some uncomfortable, even in this comparatively open-minded era. The short story has been well recreated in the opera and in this production; perhaps it will become a classic of its kind.

-James H. North, Fanfare