



Creating *Cold Mountain*

BY HEIDI WALESON

STUDENT SINGERS HELP TO SHAPE A MAJOR MODERN OPERA.

Four young singers burst into the room, laughing and full of excitement. Their day at Curtis has been, typically, tightly scheduled; three of the four auditioned in the morning for a major competition and they have just left a late-afternoon reception. It's what came in between, though, that has them exhilarated: a private performance of scenes from a major new opera by Jennifer Higdon to be premiered in 2015 at the Santa Fe Opera. As they sit down briefly to discuss the music and their part in its creation, they are eager to unpack their experience, finishing one another's sentences and enthusing about the new work.

Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Jennifer Higdon is best known for her orchestral music, but for the past several years, she has been deeply enmeshed in the writing of her first opera, *Cold Mountain*, based on the 1997 Charles Frazier novel. In December, Dr. Higdon spent an intensive week in the heart of the opera world as she, her librettist Gene Scheer, dramaturg and director Leonard Foglia, and sixteen student singers workshopped the opera's second act. As they had done with Act I a year earlier, the singers performed the act scene-by-scene for two three-hour sessions each day, giving the creators the opportunity to assess the piece and make the changes necessary to strengthen it.

Workshops have become an essential feature in the development of new operas, which, unlike plays, don't get out-of-town tryouts. As a result, for co-commissioning companies Santa Fe Opera and Opera Philadelphia (which will mount *Cold Mountain* in 2016), a strong workshop process is important. Says David Devan, the general director of Opera Philadelphia: "You can write music and a libretto, but you don't know what you have until you hear the sound of it, the relationships between characters, and the pacing. It's too hard to get that from a score." Workshops are doubly crucial for a first-time opera composer.

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Above left: Singers from the Curtis Opera Theatre in a private performance of scenes from *Cold Mountain*. In the foreground are Jarrett Ott as Inman and Rachel Sterrenberg as Ada.

Above center: Composer Jennifer Higdon, who holds the Milton L. Rock Chair in Composition Studies at Curtis, spoke to invited listeners at a run-through of scenes from Act II of *Cold Mountain*, her first opera.

Above right: *Cold Mountain* director Leonard Foglia (top) and librettist Gene Scheer

PHOTOS BY KARLI CADEL

The Curtis Institute of Music was a natural host for the workshop. Dr. Higdon, a Curtis alumna, is on the composition faculty; and the Curtis Opera Theatre is home to a stable of superlative young artists who could only benefit from living with the new opera for several months and working closely with the composer on refining its vocal language. Mikael Eliassen, artistic director of the Curtis Opera Theatre and the Hirsig Family Head-of-Department Chair in Vocal Studies, spearheaded the collaboration. “I believe very strongly that singers should be aware of the opera writing going on today,” he says. “When we have a composer like Jennifer Higdon sitting in our midst, it’s our responsibility to give them the opportunity to work with her.”

THE LUXURY OF TIME

The structure of the workshop—Act I was done in 2012, with the same singers, also for a full week—offered a particularly luxurious experience for the creative team. On both occasions, the singers received their scores several months in advance and worked on them with coach Lisa Keller. By the time they arrived at the workshop, they had internalized the notes and the characters. Mr. Scheer, who has written numerous opera libretti and participated in other workshops, felt this made a big difference. “Professional workshops frequently happen so quickly that preparation time is lacking,” he says. “There’s a push just to get the music learned, and it becomes a sing-through. You want the material to be done well enough so you can assess if the problem is the material or the performance. If it’s done poorly, you could end up cutting things that would actually work. These singers were so good and so well prepared that we got a really honest assessment. It was a great gift they gave to us.”

Cold Mountain is an odyssey and a love story. It’s the tale of Inman, a Confederate soldier who deserts, then walks from Richmond, Virginia, to his home in the North Carolina mountains to return to Ada, the woman he loves. Ada, meanwhile, is trying to keep her

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farm running in wartime. It was a subject that resonated with Dr. Higdon, a Southerner who grew up not far from the actual Cold Mountain. (Indeed, she supplied much of the regional dialect for the libretto.) In preparation for writing, she studied a great many operas and attended nine premieres, focusing on how good operas are structured.

She found the Curtis students to be an invaluable resource in frequent meetings during the workshop preparation period. “They were like superb music teachers,” she says. “I needed to be sure that the vocal things were realistic. This opera has a lot of people in distress, and the human voice in distress is at a different pitch. You don’t think about that with a violin concerto.” She was intent on making sure that her lines were singable. “I said to them, don’t hesitate to tell me if anything is awkward—like a long melisma, or a leap, or the placement of a word—and I want your suggestions about how best to change it. I don’t want to take anything for granted. Talking to singers is the best way to learn.”

Soprano Rachel Sterrenberg, who sang the role of Ada, was thrilled to have a prominent composer asking her advice. “We had discussions about the tessitura of a soprano and a mezzo and what the difference is; we talked about what a singer can handle, like how many high notes you can sing in a row. We learned a lot about our voices, because we had to communicate that to Jennifer. This was something I’ve never had to do, because normally music is given to us, and we are expected to be able to learn it. It was a big learning process for us to be able to articulate what singers can do.”

“You could tell the difference between Act I and Act II,” says baritone Jarrett Ott, who sang Inman. In the first workshop, he notes, Dr. Higdon “really listened”—and Act II benefited. As a result, “we didn’t really change a whole lot vocally in the second act.”

MOVING PARTS

For the five days of each actual workshop, the singers acted as “guinea pigs,” as Ott says, for the team. “This workshop allowed us to diagnose every single scene, and the whole arc of the characters,” says director Leonard Foglia. “I’m always looking for clarity. Is it in the music? The libretto? The performance? And because an opera score is so complicated, changes other than a clean cut are often hard to make.

“However, we made a major change in Act II: We moved a scene. Being able to do that, on the spot, with the singers—to flip scenes, and hear it one way, and then another way—was invaluable.” Dr. Higdon spent several mornings before the afternoon workshop sessions writing new transitional material to make the switch work. The team also decided that one scene, a recitative for one of the characters, really needed to be an aria. This entirely new piece of writing for librettist and composer was a task that began after the workshop ended.

By the time the workshop was over, everyone was imbued with *Cold Mountain*. Jazimina MacNeil, who played Ada’s friend Ruby, was struck by the lyricism of Dr. Higdon’s vocal writing. For tenor Spencer Lang, who played the villain Teague, it was the sometimes uncomfortable intensity of delving into his own dark side for inspiration that left the most lasting impression. Rachel Sterrenberg hopes to use one of Ada’s arias as an audition piece after the opera’s premiere. And Jarrett Ott adds, “Creating a character for the very first time—hardly anybody gets to do that. Usually, you go to a recording and take this cadenza, that color, and copy it. Here you need to be your own creator. This will help me when I go back to other characters, to break them down for myself.”

“It was pretty impressive how they embraced the characters,” Dr. Higdon says of the singers. “They felt real ownership. It’s very emotional, and with the end of the workshop, there’s a little bit of mourning going on.” Getting to know the singers personally has been a profound experience for her as well. “I haven’t had that much contact with singers before, and I’ve learned a lot about what they do, and what they care about,” she says. “That’s what music is about, relationships. And that’s what this opera is about, too.” ♦

Heidi Waleson is the opera critic for the Wall Street Journal and a regular contributor to Overtones, Symphony, Opera News, and other national publications.

Curtis Opera Theatre singers (from top): Rachel Sterrenberg and Jarrett Ott; Spencer Lang; Rachel Sterrenberg and Jazimina MacNeil