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Burning Bright: Opera in Three Acts (review)

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Burning Bright: Opera in Three Acts by Frank Lewin

Mordeen: Sherry Overholt, soprano

Victor: Rinde Eckert, tenor

Joe Saul: Lee Velta, baritone

Friend Ed: Scott Altman, bass-baritone

New Symphony Orchestra of Sofia conducted by

Rossen Milanov.

ALBANY TROY 469/71 (3 CDs) \$36.98

Reviewed by John Ditsky

Frank Lewin's operatic version of *Burning Bright* was given an excerpted performance at a Steinbeck conference some years ago, and the composer himself made a presentation about it at the 2002 "John Steinbeck's Americas" conference at Hofstra University on Long Island. I had to miss the latter event because of conference overscheduling, and though I saw the composer thereafter, he did not strike me as a man needing to be bothered. I did not bother him.

As a student at Yale in 1950, Frank Lewin attended a production of *Burning Bright*—a distinction few of us can lay claim to—and the play's theme obviously touched him deeply. His eventual resultant operatic version confirms as much, running as it surely does longer than the original play.

Lewin (I can only assume he has done the libretto here as well as serving as producer and director) has preserved Steinbeck's triple setting of air (circus acrobatics), land (a farm), and sea (a fishing boat). Ingeniously enough, he has placed the final hospital scene aboard a space ship—which works quite well, actually.

Lewin was obviously struck by Steinbeck's notion that no man's "seed" is more important than what "his" children could inherit, a point as moot now as when the play was written. Mordeen's strategy of continuing Joe Saul's line by having sex with Victor now seems less "necessary," thanks to genetic tinkering.

Lewin has wisely eliminated perhaps the most cold-hearted moment in all of Steinbeck, the one in which Friend Ed disposes of Victor as though the latter were a used sexual aid (some sort of Rickettsian treatment of humans as lab rats). Retained is Steinbeck's bizarre choice to have Joe Saul present his newborn with a clean bill of health, a dumb gift even less useful than frankincense and myrrh. Men!

But Lewin has retained Steinbeck's three-act form, one per CD; and his musical style, eclectic, varies by setting. Accessible, it suggests such other composers as Aaron Copland (at the start of the farm act). Some orchestral passages do sound better than the vocal lines, reminding one of Mark Twain's remark that Wagner's music is better than it sounds.

Minor cavils include the inconsistent use of regional accents. As to recorded sound and singing, or even whether the recording forces were ever all together at once, one must note that all is serviceable (and that a second recording is unlikely). There is a certain lack of balance—the offstage circus music in the first act takes up a great deal of time, and the foghorns in the third act blare like an eternity of Eugene O'Neill. Voices seem often apart from their mikes.

Most important, what Lewin has recognized is that Steinbeck's original script was in effect spoken opera from the start—and therefore, had to be discarded. Gone are the tortured locutions that made some of us squirm in our seats. But retained is an operatic structure that could have turned into something verismo, had it been shorter and, in the end, less happy.

So often is the operatic hero role assigned to a tenor that it is odd to find Victor in that voice range, but that is likely a reflection of Joe Saul's "old man" image, which Victor repeatedly harps on. I should note that the Japanese scholar Hirosama Takamura has already published a translation of Lewin's libretto—a labor of no-pay love if ever there was one. In the end, we are left with a satisfying listening experience that is grateful to Steinbeck's text without bowing to it. We just need to acknowledge that Steinbeck heard an opera from the start—but couldn't read a score.

JOHN DITSKY is retiring as Professor of English at the University of Windsor in 2003, and was for a dozen years a staff reviewer at the record magazine Fanfare.