

Post-punk opera adds video to mix

By T.L. Ponick
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What do you get when you merge operatic traditions with post-punk rock musicians and sensibilities?

Well, no one really knows, but the D.C. area will learn the answer next week, when the Washington Performing Arts Society presents the world premiere of "The Nitrate Hymnal" at the George Washington Masonic Memorial Auditorium in Alexandria.

A multimedia collaboration between Bethesda composer-librettist Bob Massey and Columbia, Mo.-based indie filmmaker David Wilson, "The Nitrate Hymnal" combines opera singers and an eclectic chamber ensemble with screens and scrims populated with video and film projections that weave through the consciousness of Mimi, an older woman trying to re-connect with her past.

"What David and I are trying to do is use music and video to try to get the audience inside of Mimi's head," says Mr. Massey, 33, a fixture in the area's Gen-X music scene. "Mimi's memory is gone, and she and the audience have to come to terms with it."

Directed by David Schweizer, "The Nitrate Hymnal" is scored for two electric guitars; a string section of three violins, viola, two cellos and bass; electronic keyboard; pre-recorded sounds; acoustic percussion; and four singers — "at last count," Mr. Massey adds.

He and Mr. Wilson are trying to bridge the gap between traditional classical music and the more open expressions of today's post-punk period and perhaps the gap between two different audiences as well. "The music is definitely modern," Mr. Wilson says, "but it's easy on the ears. We're not trying to club anyone over the head with difficult sounds."

"What is new here," Mr. Massey says, "is that we have a hybrid art with rock and classical instruments, played and sung by people with different kinds of musical training." These textures are knitted together, producing a sound that's "a little edgier than chamber orchestra, more lush than the average rock band," he says.

"It's not a rock opera. We use the instruments the way you'd treat them in an orchestra, not with 4/4 drums driving the beat all the time. Even the electric guitar is used like an orchestral instrument."

"Bob wanted a sound that was classic but not classical," says mezzo-soprano Hai-Ting Chinn, who portrays Mimi's caretaker, the Nurse/Destroyer, in the production. "He was looking for an eclectic mix that avoids the troubles involved with rock and classical," adds Miss Chinn, who describes herself as a "dissident opera singer."

"The music is interesting, weird, not like anything else I've ever heard," she says. "It's not loud, and it doesn't sound like punk in any way. It sounds like contemporary opera." Miss Chinn describes her own vocal lines as resembling a free-form recitative.

"There's definitely an element of improv in it," she says. "My hope

is that the music will appeal to thirtysomethings looking for something new while still drawing in more traditional operagoers."

"Bob is exploring the musical possibilities while subverting them at the same time," says classically trained coloratura soprano Susan Oetgen, who sings the role of Mimi. "I think he's interested in creating a bridge to opera for members of his peer group who haven't had the operatic experience but who instinctively grasp its beauty."

Mr. Massey himself readily admits to the influence of Estonian composer Arvo Part, whose tonal minimalism, like that of Philip Glass, has inspired younger contemporary composers.

A Richmond native and freelance writer, Mr. Massey majored in English as an undergraduate at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg.

Returning to his hometown, he became involved in the punk-rock music scene as a guitarist, eventually ending up in the D.C. area, which had a critical mass of experimental musicians.

Red up with mass-produced pop music and equally down on the 12-tone drivel of the classical, academic serialists who disconnected from their audience, Mr. Massey was attracted to the independent spirits who prevailed in the local post-punk scene. He has worked with several area ensembles, including a post-punk chamber-music group that calls itself Telegraph Melts.

Mr. Wilson, 28, his eventual partner in "The Nitrate Hymnal," traveled a similar musical path. "The original punk was a reaction to 'arena rock,'" Mr. Wilson says. "The idea was that anyone could pick up a guitar, learn three chords and start a band. Just do it."

As punk itself became commercialized, more area musicians, like Mr. Massey, drifted into what they now call the post-punk period, exploring different modes of personal musical expression and eschewing blatant commercialization.

Always interested in classical music, Mr. Massey appreciated the greater expressive latitude and complexity in its pre-serialist forms. He was surprised that many of his fellow post-punk musicians also had classical training. The opera particularly intrigued him as an art form, although its heavy layers of performance history troubled him.

"The central question," Mr. Wilson says, "is how do we get rid of operatic baggage and tell a story that's less bombastic and more realistic?"

To explore fusing classical music with pop, Mr. Massey started the first Punk Not Rock salons in his home in 1999. Those updated salons involved intimate, live performances by young classical and post-punk musicians, followed by spirited discussions among the musicians and the invited audience.

The success of these evenings persuaded Mr. Massey to try creating something in a longer form. Fate intervened when he came into possession of a collection of vintage 8mm home movies shot by his grandfather from 1941 through 1985. He hit upon the idea of using the films as an interactive backdrop for a tale of love and tragedy that spanned the decades of a couple's life together.

Mr. Massey got in touch with Mr. Wilson, whom he had met several years earlier and whose work in independent film he admired. Stubbornly basing himself in out-of-the-way Missouri, Mr. Wilson already had made a name for himself as a columnist for Punk Planet magazine and as the co-founder and manager of the Ragtag CinemaCafe, a movie house that screened international and independent films and videos. He is a strong supporter of the DIY (Do It Yourself) film movement and also has produced his own short films.

"When I heard about this project, it resonated with me," Mr. Wilson says. He was excited to try fusing two entirely different musical

traditions with the technical innovations he was exploring in film.

However, both collaborators realized that the first order of business was to stabilize their half-century-old treasure trove of home movies — thus the word nitrate in the title. They employed a Boston firm, Brodsky and Treadway, that specialized in restoring old media to do the complex job. Much of the collection ended up on DVDs, enabling Mr. Wilson, along with film editor Emily Koonse, to manipulate and edit the footage on his Macintosh computer.

Meanwhile, Mr. Massey got to work on the libretto and the music. What resulted was a four-act opera that tells the story, not of his own grandparents, but of an American couple who try to preserve their youth by putting it on reels of film. The videos assembled by Mr. Wilson show the "posed" moments captured on the film, while the music focuses on the harsher realities that take place in the life of every married couple.

To maintain dramatic tension, the timeline created by the collaborators moves backward in time so that the beginning is actually the end — the honeymoon of the young couple, which takes place just weeks before the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Adding an additional element of surrealism, the soloists occasionally sing to and interact with the phantom images surrounding them, creating a Joycean stream-of-consciousness effect. The images will be projected by up to five projectors controlled by a matrix switcher. "It's reality swirling around — what life is really like," Mr. Massey says. Performers and creators alike are looking forward to the kind of reception "The Nitrate Hymnal" will receive. "It's exciting to work with all the talented people Bob and David have pulled in around them with so many different backgrounds and experiences," Miss Oetgen says. "It's bringing opera back to a new vocabulary."

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WHAT: "The Nitrate Hymnal,"
WHEN: Jan. 23 through 25;
WHERE: The George Washington Masonic National Memorial Auditorium, Alexandria
TICKETS: Pay what you can Jan. 23; \$15 Jan. 24, 25. For tickets, call 202/785-WPAs.
PHONE: 202/833-9800