

Arts

Opera

'The Nitrate Hymnal': Moving Pictures

By JOE BANNO
Special to *The Washington Post*

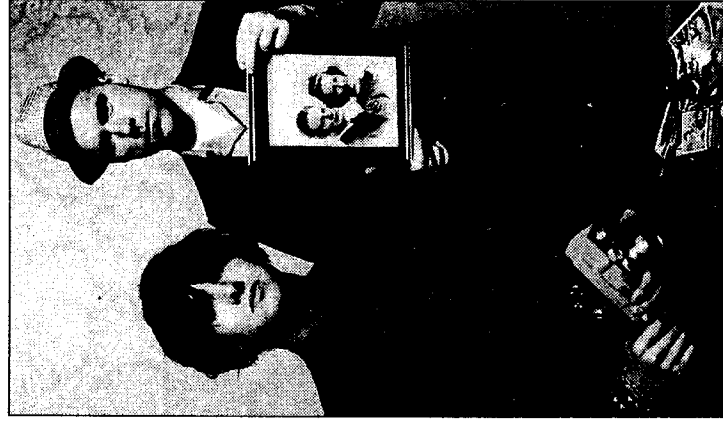
Every few years, a new opera comes along that's intended to redefine the art form. Bob Massey and David Wilson's "The Nitrate Hymnal," which had its world premiere Thursday night at the George Washington Masonic National Memorial Auditorium in Alexandria, is the latest assault on the battlements of traditional opera.

But despite Massey's pedigree as a post-punk guitarist, much of "Hymnal" harkens back to 17th-century opera, with lithe, chantlike vocal lines written as nearly continuous recitative, and a chamber orchestra (acoustic strings, electric guitars, keyboards and drums) playing a gently supportive role.

Even the plot has an early-baroque gloss: Michael, a filmmaker watching his grandmother's life ebbing away in a hospital bed, shows her home movies to rekindle her memories and keep her alive. Through the films, grandmother and grandson relive her husband's geriatric decline, her son's suicide and her courtship and troubled marriage. At the end, Death arrives (in a surprising human form) to carry her to a reunion with the husband she loved but betrayed. The filmmaker is left with his celluloid memories.

The modern element of filmmaking aside, we might as well be watching Orpheus charming Death to win his bride Eurydice back from Hades. Massey—whose cache of home movies from his own grandfather sparked this fictional tale he's created with Wilson—is acting as a double-Orpheus here, telling a story of redemptive art while using his own art to redeem a lost loved one.

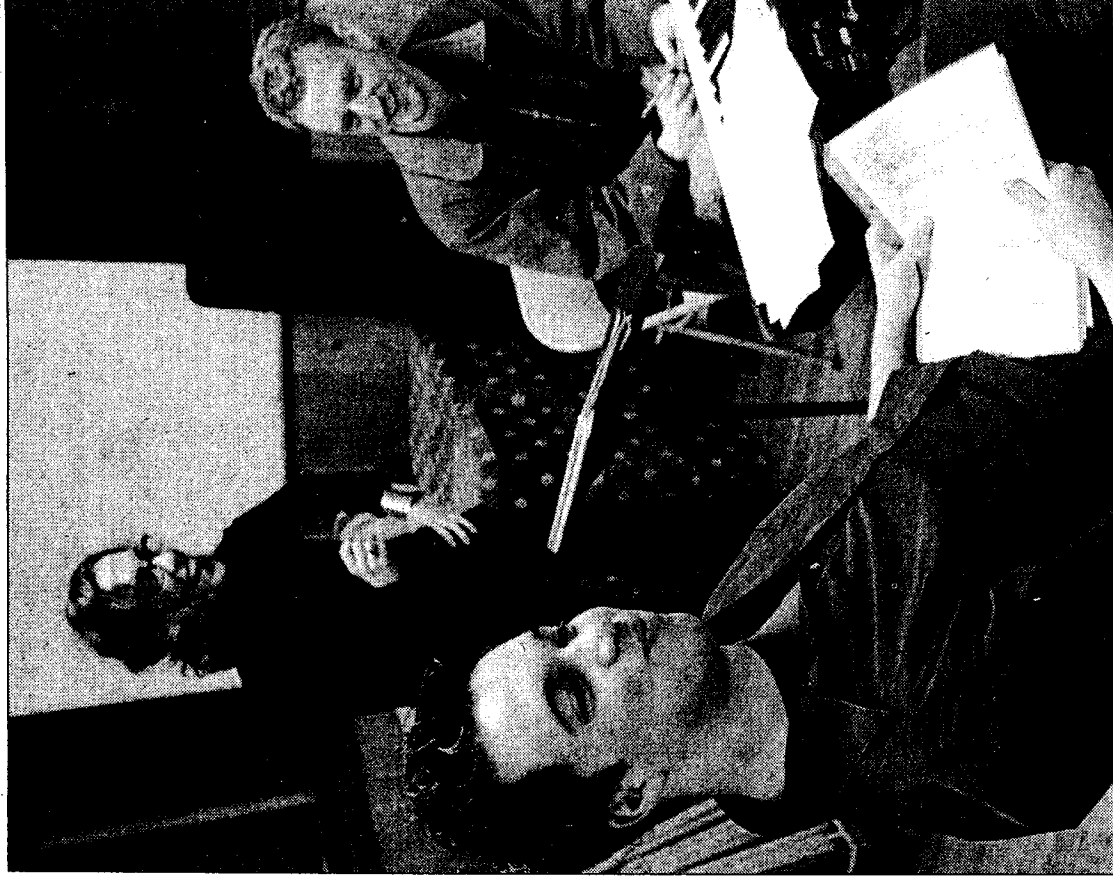
But if the form of "Hymnal" hasn't reinvented the operatic wheel, its sound world feels fresh. That's not to say Massey, whose



BY BEN FANKERSLEY

David Wilson, left, and composer Bob Massey, creators of "The Nitrate Hymnal."

day job is as a news aide at The Washington Post, doesn't raid a few genres—post-punk rubs shoulders with post-Sondheim; progressive jazz melds with fusion; and brief visits are paid by Shostakovich, Piazzolla and Glenn Branca—but the musical stew is very much his own. There's less guitar-driven music than you might expect from an indie-rock composer. But the canny orchestration by David Durst (with contributions from Massey and producer Jean Cook) uses the guitars for color, to growl threateningly under the strings or simply add a little grit



BY STEPHANIE K. KORNBERG FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

"Nitrate Hymnal's" Cesar Guadamuz, left, Susan Oetgen and David Durst in rehearsal.

young cast. The design elements further amplify the visual world Wilson and

Schweitzer have created, from Beth Baldwin's chaste white hospital-curtained set, to the otherworldly chill of Mike Daniels's lights, to costumes by Lynn Sharp Spears that touchingly echo the 1940s fashions

seen in the home movies.
The Nitrate Hymnal, produced by *Anti-Social Music* and sponsored by the *Washington Performing Arts Society*, repeats tonight at a sold-out performance and tomorrow afternoon at 2.