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Opera in an Odd Key

*Mix Old Home Movies, Post-Punk Music
And What Do You Get? 'Nitrate Hymnal.'*

By PHILIP KENNICOTT
Washington Post Staff Writer

By the time composer Robert Massey's grandparents began making home movies in 1941, a new color film stock was revolutionizing the possibilities for the amateur auteur. Not only did the film produce color images, it was not a nitrate-based stock, which meant it was not so volatile and subject to deterioration as older black-and-white films. But it is precisely those unstable qualities that suggested the title of Massey's new opera, "The Nitrate Hymnal," which

opens with a pay-what-you-can performance Thursday evening at the George Washington Masonic National Memorial Auditorium in Alexandria. It is an opera that uses film and music to explore the flash point of family, memory and the odd need of man to document life even as he lives it.

Massey, a local musician who for years has run a salon devoted to bringing musicians and composers of all stripes together, comes out of the DIY, or do it yourself, post-punk scene—

See NITRATE, G8, Col. 1

"The whole piece definitely exists on paper. But the challenge is translating between people who don't read music and people who do."

Composer Bob Massey

'Nitrate Hymnal,' Turning A New Page in Opera

NITRATE, From G1

which, he explains, means, "I'll be damned if anyone tells me I can't do an opera." He has created around himself a not-so-underground music world that lives the boundary-less, non-hierarchical ethic of communal musicmaking, an ethic that some classical opera composers might hold up as an ideal but have rarely put into practice with any success. His "Nitrate Hymnal" is described by the Washington Performing Arts Society (which is presenting it through Saturday) as multimedia, interactive, post-punk, hybrid and several other things as well, which adds up to: You have to see it to know what it's about.

Massey, who has a day job as a news aide at The Washington Post, discovered a large trove of his grandparents' films when his grandmother was dying three years ago. He then started collaborating with independent filmmaker David Wilson, whom he had met through the thriving demimonde of the post-punk music world.

The home movies will be projected on multiple screens during the opera, allowing images of Massey's grandparents—captured over decades beginning with their honeymoon just before Pearl Harbor—to interact with singers onstage. Massey says the opera doesn't have a linear narrative but is structured as a set of flashbacks that reach ever farther and deeper into the past of the characters.

The project quickly snowballed: Last year, the pair received a \$10,000 grant from the innovative Creative Capital foundation, which nurtures new talent; and then came an offer to present the piece from the traditionally conservative WPAS, the behemoth of Washington presenting organizations. With hopes of capturing a younger, more experimental-friendly audience, the WPAS is giving a composer's first opera a very prestigious opening gig.

A little less than two weeks before the premiere, Massey, 33, was feeling the strain. The opera is the largest project he's attempted, and he was making the requisite self-deprecating comments about the hubris of it all. But the Christmas holidays were spent rewriting and producing new material, and now, with rehearsals in full swing, he admitted he wasn't getting a lot of quality sleep.

At a Saturday afternoon rehearsal on the campus of George Washington University, it seemed that Massey and his collaborators have followed in the footsteps of opera

'NITRATE HYMNAL'

"The Nitrate Hymnal" opens Thursday with a "pay-what-you-can" performance, and continues Friday and Saturday with tickets \$15. All performances are at 8 p.m. at the George Washington Masonic National Memorial Auditorium in Alexandria. For more information call 202-833-9800 or visit www.wpas.org or www.nitratehymnal.net.

reformers and rethinkers past. Melodic ideas were transparent and emphasized clarity of text, and the music was anchored by bass lines that move with an almost baroque sense of gravity. With string players in one group, electric guitarists in another, the four vocalists in a third, it reminded one of the earliest operas, from the days of Monteverdi, when the accompanying orchestra was a loose assemblage of players, using the barest of musical scores and a lot of improvisatorial filling of details.

"The whole piece definitely exists on paper," says Massey. "But the challenge is translating between people who don't read music and people who do. People who play in rock bands typically memorize hours of music and go about it in a

different way than people who read from charts. The fun is putting it together, working with people from both those worlds."

The sense that the new opera joins people of disparate backgrounds and talents goes beyond just the camaraderie of rehearsal. Wilson, 28, says his interest in working with musicians came from a basic sense of social envy.

"I always felt frustrated by the fact that I didn't play in a band," says Wilson, whose films about rural youth culture have circulated through underground and independent film festivals across the country. "People in bands were being welcomed into each other's houses, into bars and community centers, to play for each other, and I felt there needed to be a network like that for independent filmmakers. That network, for me, is really the crowning achievement of the DIY music movement: People travel around the country and around the world and make music without all the mechanics of the music industry."

Wilson's contribution to the project is part film preservation (converting fragile acetate to digital images) and part editing; he also created some original material to supplement the home movies. Although the original films showed signs of age, they were still serviceable and, after some cleaning and color enhancement, they are captivating in an innocently voyeuristic way.

"Right up to this moment, if you



BY STEPHANIE K. KUYKENDAL FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

From left, director David Schweizer and cast members Hai-Ting Chimm, Susan Oetgen and Cesar Guadamuz during a rehearsal of the new work, which eschews a linear narrative, structured instead as a set of flashbacks.



BY BEN TANKERSLEY

Collaborators David Wilson, left, and Bob Massey received a \$10,000 grant from the Creative Capital foundation and the backing of the Washington Performing Arts Society in presenting their experimental work, "Nitrate Hymnal."

were on film, you were in Hollywood," says Wilson. "Then all of a sudden everyone could be on film. It was a mini-revolution, and it is endlessly fascinating to see how this couple deals with that, how they set the camera, how they walk away from it, and walk back toward it, again and again. The camera becomes another person in their surroundings."

For Massey, the films came as a jolt. They let him bypass the usual preoccupation of figuring out the hidden dramas of one's immediate family, and enter the world of his grandparents, who appear in the earliest footage as young adults. He was surprised by the extent to which his grandparents had made a

record of their life together.

"You know them as elderly people who take care of you, and you don't know the problems that they've been through," says Massey. "That's what's so shocking about seeing them when they were young adults, people who are younger than I am, young and hot, and in love, and they don't have a family yet, or kids, and they have no idea what's coming down the road. They are just there, in that moment."

Massey and Wilson decided to forge a drama that uses Massey's family as a starting point rather than a road map for the narrative.

Wilson says he was fascinated by the purely visual sense of character revealed by the footage, by the momentary flashes of immediacy and personality that flit through the awkwardness and self-consciousness of home-moviemaking.

"Not knowing any of the family back story," says Wilson, "as we created the opera, I felt really free to say, what if this happened? Or what if this character did that?"

"I had to decide early on that I wasn't going to follow the issues and stories of my family that closely," says Massey. He says explaining the project to his grandfather, who is 87, isn't going to be easy, though his grandfather gave him full license to use the films freely.

"And I *really* don't care," says director David Schweizer, about any concern for fidelity to family history. Schweizer, a no-nonsense veteran theater director, has taken on an encompassing role as mentor to the artists and nursemaid to the pro-

ject. His theatrical credits include work in major opera houses, including the Houston Grand Opera, and theaters in New York and around the world. Massey and Wilson consider him a catch.

"For us, it's like we put together a sandlot baseball team and Casey Stengel shows up and says, 'Hey, you guys need a manager?'" says Wilson.

Schweizer says he approaches the work with no sense of distinction between opera and musical theater. The fundamentals, for him, are the same.

"Opera is music-driven total theater," he says.

Since late in December, he's been subjecting rehearsals of the work to a critical eye and making pragmatic suggestions about the basic mechanics of making a full-length piece of theater.

"I'm an old buzzard and I can pick up on these things immediately," he says.

Massey, whose title for the work, "Nitrate Hymnal," suggests a piece that is a collection of reverential songs, nevertheless likes the resonance (if not the pretensions) of the word "opera."

"There's this collision of culture, punk kids, and this guy who works at Glimmerglass," he says of Schweizer, whose upcoming gigs include a stint at the Glimmerglass Opera festival in Upstate New York.

"We call it Schmopera," says Massey.

"Yes, children, enjoy your little dissonance," says Schweizer, affectionately.