WEILL ~ PROPHETEN

David Drew on the remarkable history of a vast Biblical drama and its suppressed final act

Propheten is a performing version by Noam Sheriff and the present writer of the unperformed final act of a Biblical drama - also a contemporary drama - generally known as The Eternal Road, (produced by Max Reinhardt in 1937). Scored for soloists, large chorus and symphony orchestra with organ and two pianos, Propheten could well be heard as a monumental forebear of Weill's and Anderson's adaptation of Alan Paton's anti-Apartheid novel Cry, the Beloved Country, heard at the Proms in 1993.

Weill devoted much of the autumn and winter of 1934-5 to his opera-length score for Franz Werfel's Der Weg der Verheissung (The Road of Promise) - a vast four-act saga of the Jewish people in which the Biblical scenes are framed by the experiences of a small community and its Rabbi at a time - of persecution.

Four months after Hitler seized power in Germany, a remarkable American named Meyer Weisgal had staged at the 1933 Chicago World's Fair a mammoth pageant depicting 4,000 years of Jewish history. Its success was such that Weisgal was not only able to hand the President of the English Zionist Federation, Chaim Weizmann, a large cheque for the Fund for Relief of German Jewry, but also to persuade Max Reinhardt to direct a comparable project in collaboration with a major writer and a major composer of his choice.

Unlike Weisgal, Reinhardt was neither a religious man nor a Zionist. But his choice of Werfel surely took account of the fact that Werfel's formidable wife - none other than Gustav Mahler's beloved Alma - was already nudging him towards Catholicism. If The Road of Promise was ever to fulfil its charitable aims, its appeal had to be broadly based.

The venue first considered for the world premiere was the Royal Albert Hall; but the one finally chosen was New York's Manhattan Opera House. While Der Weg der Verheissung was being translated into The Eternal Road, Weill drafted his entire musical setting of the German text - including the fourth and final act, which Reinhardt was soon to suppress owing to the work's excessive length.

After calamitous mishaps and a year-long postponement, The Eternal Road played to large and enthusiastic houses for eight consecutive months. But a mounting tide of debts finally engulfed it.

Fittingly enough, the suppressed final act had originally been entitled Propheten. Shorn of the definite article, the title has a secular ring appropriate to the central conflict between the protagonist Jeremiah, as man of peace (with Isaiah at his side), and his demagogic war-mongering opponent, the False Prophet Hananiah.

Ten years after the collapse of The Eternal Road, Weisgal commissioned from Weill an orchestral arrangement of the Hatikvah melody for performance at a New York ceremony in honour of Weizmann. Six months later - on 14 May, half a century ago - the new State of Israel was proclaimed and Weizmann was named its first President.

The Hatikvah became Israel's national anthem, but Weill's orchestra was not officially adopted: its sobering contemplation of the recent past and the inscrutable future made it sound uncannily like a long-lost prologue to Propheten. *

David Drew is on the editorial board of the Kurt Weill Edition, and is currently preparing a three-volume study of Weill's works.

WEILL Propheten

Prom 13 Sunday 26 July, 7.30pm
Soloists
BBC Symphony Chorus
BBC Symphony Orchestra
conducted by Matthias Bamert