

WEILL ~ PROPHETEN

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



Above
MATTHIAS BAMERT;
NOAM SHERIFF;
DAVID DREW

Left
KURT WEILL (CENTRE)
AND MEYER WEISGAL
(RIGHT) ARRIVING IN
NEW YORK, 1935

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 – any 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 orchestration 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