

SCENE

Edited by
SARAH
NEVILLE

Double premiere a unique opera event

CARDIFF PRODUCER John Eaton created a unique opera event at the Camden Festival.

The production he staged at the Bloomsbury Theatre constituted an unusual double British premiere of Kurt Weill's two one-act operas, *The Protagonist* and *The Czar Has His Photograph Taken*.

John Eaton was born in Tanzania, "but my grandmother was Welsh." He came to Cardiff as a staff director with the Welsh National Opera where, most notably, he was involved in the production of John Metcalf's *The Journey*.

He was also, with Metcalf, a co-founder of the Music Theatre Ensemble at St Donat's Arts Centre.

Eaton's association with the music of the German composer Kurt Weill dates from the first work which he ever directed, Weill's *The Rise And Fall Of The City Of Mahagonny*, when in his own words he "fell in love with the idiom of Weill's music."

In preparation for the Camden Festival, Eaton spent a lot of time in the British Museum "poring over every piece that Weill ever wrote" and

By IFAN PAYNE

as a result he found two little-known one-act operas which Weill had composed to libretti by the German Expressionist playwright George Kaiser, and which had never been performed in this country.

Weill composed *The Protagonist*, his first opera, in 1926, and subsequently wrote *The Czar Has His Photograph Taken* as a contrasting work to be performed together with it as a double bill.

The Protagonist is a psychological drama about an actor who gets caught up in the roles that he plays, and what happens when he confuses the stage with real life.

"The opera," says Eaton, "takes on quite a challenge in that it deals with illusion and reality and with forbidden love. It makes quite compelling drama."

In the production Eaton took a radical approach to the work, placing the orchestra on the stage behind the action in an attempt, in his words, "to explore the relationship of music and drama — I am aiming at an 'immediate' dramatic experience."

"*The Protagonist*," says the producer, "is a psycho thriller."

In contrast, *The Czar Has His Photograph Taken* is a zany detective thriller in which a gang of terrorists plan to kill the Czar by putting a gun in a camera. The opera, incidentally, contains an unusual "solo" for the gramophone.

Says Eaton, "*The Czar* has a delightful jazzy quality... I call it a Terrorist Romance."

In his production Eaton brought the orchestra forward to the more conventional pit, so that the action all took place behind a proscenium.

As Eaton pointed out, "This Weill double bill is very unsentimental music theatre which provides an opportunity to show another side of the operatic coin."

John Eaton is one of Wales's few opera producers and following this successful operatic event he is already planning another Weill premiere, *Silberfee*, at next year's festival and is planning productions of Mozart's *Il Seraglio* and Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* in the United States.

Another unusual venture concerns his current plans for music drama written specifically for television.