

EATON *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* • Karl Kramer-Johansen, cond; Alejandro Acierio (Passerby, Applicant, Frat Boy, cl); Dan Barrett (Young Man, Frat Boy, vc); Tony Boutte (Roger Button, Roscoe Button); Matthew Burns (Dr. Keene, Child, Applicant, Young Man, Gen. Moncrief, Coach, Re-enlistment Officer); Jennifer Conner (Child, Cheerleader); Ethan Fran (Applicant, Young Man); Dominic Inferra (Young [old] Benjamin Button in Act II); Margaret Lancaster (Passerby, Child, Applicant, fl); Linda Larson (Young Teacher, Hildegard Moncrief, Teddy); Ana Milosavljevic (Child, Applicant, Young Man, Frat Boy, vn); Christopher Oldfather (Child, Young Woman, pn); Jennifer Roderer (Nurse, Registrar, Rita, Nana); Dennis Sullivan (Stage Drummer in War, Young Woman); Chris Pedro Trakas (Old [young] Benjamin Button in Act I, Applicant, Frat Boy, cl) • ALBANY 1366 (86:50)

Critic Andrew Porter has called John Eaton the most interesting opera composer in America, and with good reason: This well-seasoned microtonal composer has done more to forge a personal path in his operatic writing than just about anyone else I can think of. Once the listener becomes familiar with Eaton's style, he will mistake him for no one else. Full disclosure dictates that I mention that I was a composition pupil of Eaton back in the late 1970s (I consider him as having been my primary teacher), and had the pleasure of assisting in the production of two of his operas at Indiana University. I've not had much contact with him since he moved from Bloomington to the University of Chicago, and he is now retired from teaching, making his home—the last I've heard—in New Jersey, where he is undoubtedly busy composing new works.

Eaton has written in almost all genres, including symphonies, chamber music, song cycles, and so forth, but he is likely better-known for his some 20 operas than anything else. In his early compositional career, he concentrated on grand opera (*Herakles*, *Myshkin*—perhaps the first television opera to employ electronics—and *Danton and Robespierre*), and gradually transitioned to a more personal and intimate theatrical experience (*The Lion and Androcles*, and *The Cry of Clytemnestra*), although he continued to produce larger-scale works as well. This direction eventually brought him to his continuing pocket opera series, a genre he created *ex nihilo*, and one which involves relatively small casts with many of the singers doing double or triple duty in various roles, even to the extent of sometimes having the instrumental performers doubling in sung vocal roles. The instrumentalists are often also required to engage in the most imaginative acrobatics while playing their instruments. The latter are kept to a minimum in the opera under review (I attended performances of three other of Eaton's pocket operas, including ...inasmuch, in Chicago about a decade ago, where I witnessed the clarinetist, flutist, violinist, etc., brilliantly playing virtuosic music while in the most uncomfortable-looking positions imaginable).

The pocket opera approach also generally eschews fancy scenery, costumes, or staging, permitting relatively easy touring by Eaton's company, the Pocket Opera Players. The composer's idea with this troupe is to bring his innovative operas to audiences that might otherwise not have opportunity to hear and see them. And, Eaton's operas demand to be seen as well as heard, for much of the interest often comes in the theatrics of the instrumental performers, as described above.

The musical style of *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* is very typical of this composer. Eaton's use of microtones throughout allows him a certain expressiveness denied to the composer using only the 12 notes of the chromatic scale. Unusual, though, is his quotation of tunes of other composers, while deconstructing them in microtonal fashion. According to the composer, he did this to help establish the plot in certain well-defined periods of American history. Thus, in *Button*, we hear snippets of microtonal versions of Brahms's *Lullaby*, Sousa's *El Capitan March*, and several songs from Harvard and Yale, the venues for much of the action of the story. The composer's skill in setting texts (this libretto having been written by daughter Estela Eaton) is such that the subtitles on the present DVD were scarcely necessary. Every vocal line sounded as if it could not have otherwise been constructed, and each was appropriately accompanied by Eaton's imaginative twitters, flutterings, and gestures from his limited orchestral resources.

The story of *Button* is drawn from the like-named short story by F. Scott Fitzgerald (many readers will have seen the recent movie—I did not—but Eaton apparently thought little of the cinematic version, having begun his opera well beforehand). The plot involves a man named Benjamin Button who lives his life in reverse, being born at the age of 70 and decreasing in age until he dies at birth. Yes, it's all very silly, but isn't that the stuff of which opera is made? I recall the wag who said "What's too silly to be said can be

sung!” But the plot is also filled with irony and exciting incidents, drawing it to Eaton’s attention and subsequent treatment. There is a quasi chiasmic structure to the piece: The scenes at Yale and Harvard serve more or less as the centerpiece of the work, and are flanked by war scenes, and scenes in kindergarten close to the beginning and end. The birth scene of the 70-year-old baby, who causes his father to recoil (who wouldn’t?), is a bookend along with the final scene of the baby being sung to as he vanishes into nothingness. Estela Eaton took certain liberties with Fitzgerald’s plot, seeking to increase the dramatic interest in certain places. These include her enhancing the conflict between Benjamin Button and his son, Roscoe, but her libretto hangs together well, and any number of amusing lines elicited laughter from the audience. It’s difficult for me to picture Estela as an adult: The last time I saw her, she was about 13 years old.

The cast and performers who comprise the Pocket Opera Players includes the talented conductor Karl Kramer-Johansen, who had to hold together a very complex score, but was solid throughout. Particularly noteworthy to my ears was the young (old) Benjamin Button of the first act, Chris Pedro Trakas, whose baritone voice was resplendent. The videography of the live performance was at least serviceable, if not particularly inspired, and sonics seemed fine. For those whose métier is innovative opera, and whose ears are tuned to microtones (it doesn’t take that much exposure to tune them, either), this DVD will pay handsome rewards. David DeBoor Canfield

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