

GUIDE TO “AM AHL AND THE NIGHT VISITORS”

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INTRODUCTION

To discuss the origins of Gian Carlo Menotti’s “Amahl and the Night Visitors” we must go back in time—not two thousand years to the time the opera takes place, but rather seventy years to the time of the opera’s origin, not to the dawning of a new age in the history of religion but rather to the dawning of the age of television. It was a time when there was no PBS, no HBO, no cable television, a time when the television networks understood that they had a responsibility not only to sell detergent and cereal but also to provide quality entertainment to their viewers. It was a time when NBC had its own opera company, dedicated to performing both operatic classics (in English translation) and new works. It was at this time that NBC decided to commission Gian Carlo Menotti to compose a Christmas opera to be premiered on Christmas Eve, 1951.

For some time, the composer, who would be responsible for both the libretto and the score, experienced great difficulty in deciding how to approach such a project. According to his own account, he was walking through the New York Metropolitan Museum one day when he happened to see Bosch’s painting “The Adoration of the Kings,” which reminded him of Christmas in his home town in Italy, where it was not Santa Claus but the Magi who brought the children their presents, though, like American children waiting up to see Santa’s arrival, he and his brother also waited in vain. Thus was born the idea to tell the story of Jesus’ birth indirectly, as experienced by a rural family and their neighbors whom the magi met by chance on their journey to Bethlehem.

Menotti was the perfect choice for such an opera. He was somewhat of an iconoclast, one who ignored the musical orthodoxy of his day which eschewed traditional melody in favor of a form of music called atonality. He preferred to style of Puccini and

Mascagni, composers who were able to create intense musical dramas while writing beautiful melodies at the same time.

Menotti once called this opera “an opera for children,” but this is true only in the sense that children can enjoy it as much as adults can. The plot is so compelling and the music flows so beautifully that the listener may be unaware of how complex it really is, with its numerous key changes, time-signature changes, “accidentals” (sharps and flats not in the key signature), and modal keys (i.e., keys that are neither major nor minor); for example, the quartet “Have You Seen a Child?” is based on a descending Dominant Phrygian scale, consisting of the notes from E to E on the white keys, but with a raised third. Or consider the wild leaps in the melody of the great comic aria, “This is My Box.”

Perhaps no composer has been more adept at making a seamless transition from regular melody to the irregularities of everyday speech. Listen for such a transition at the conclusion of Amahl’s “I Was a Shepherd,” beginning with “But Mother says”:

I had a black goat, who gave me warm sweet milk/But she
died of old age, old age/Now there is no goat left./But Mother
says that now we can both go begging from door to door. Won’t
it be fun?”

One other notable feature of this opera is Menotti’s use of short melodic phrases instead of extended vocal solos. There is never a feeling that the story has been slowed down in order to give a singer an opportunity for elaborate vocal display.

It may seem unusual that someone for whom English was a second language could write lyrics so perfect in their directness and simplicity. In fact, Menotti once said that he preferred English to Italian as a medium for opera: “I thought that because of its sharpness and greater variety of sounds, English offered a musician much greater rhythmic possibilities than Italian.”

Although “Amahl and the Night Visitors” was initially written for television, Menotti wrote it with the theater in mind—for

example, confining the action to a single set. “As a matter of fact,” he said, “all of my operas are originally conceived for an ideal stage which has no equivalent in reality, and I believe that such is the case with most dramatic authors.” The true miracle in this opera is that it works its magic in a variety of settings, including the unconventional one chosen by the Lyric for this production.

CHARACTERS

Amahl—a “crippled” child—boy soprano

Mother—mezzo-soprano

King Kaspar—tenor—one of the magi

King Melchior—bass-baritone—one of the magi

King Balthazar—bass—one of the magi

The Page—bass—assistant to the magi

Chorus of shepherds, including dancers

Note: Menotti specified that Amahl was to be played by a boy, not as a “trouser role” for a woman. The role of King Kaspar is generally played by a “character tenor,” a sub-specialty among tenors characterized by a thinner voice, a type often used for comic characters. The text indicates that one of the kings is Black, but does not specify which one. Pictures of the early productions appear to indicate that this identification was often ignored.

THE STORY

The entire opera takes place on a single set representing the interior of the home shared by Amahl and his mother and its surroundings, about two thousand years ago, somewhere in the land known then as Judea, currently Israel. There is no overture. A peaceful melody is heard in the orchestra, which I will dub “the tranquility theme.” Following that introduction, we hear Amahl playing a folk-style song on his shepherd’s pipe. His mother calls for him to come to bed, but he ignores her and resumes the melody.

When she calls again, Amahl asks for more time, but eventually he gives in, and with the aid of his crutch, he hobbles toward the house. (There is a touch of auto-biography here; Menotti was partly crippled in his youth).

Once inside, Amahl explains to his mother that “there has never been such a sky,” and that above their roof is a “star as large as a window,” but, based on her son’s past history of exaggerations, she refuses to believe him. Amahl anachronistically (remember, this is set in pre-Christian times) says “cross my heart and hope to die.” The mother then reveals what is really bothering her—the poverty that may force the two of them to become beggars.

In the opera’s first extended melodic passage, a tune remarkable for its rhythmic variety, Amahl assures his mother that begging will be fun. Her voice joins in the final measures of the aria as she wishes him good-night.

After a brief interlude, the three kings appear on the roadway, singing of their long journey in search of the “crystal star.” Amahl hobbles to the window to see what’s going on, and a pizzicato melody in the orchestra describes his uneven walk. The kings arrive at the cottage, and one of them knocks on the door. The mother calls to Amahl, asking him to open the door.

A wonderfully comic scene follows, in three parts—three being the magic number for comedy. Amahl hobbles to the door, to the same ascending melody as before, sees a king, and hobbles back to his mother to a similar but descending melody and reports: first, one king, then two, then three. Each time, his mother refuses to believe him. Eventually, she goes to the door and realizes that for once Amahl has told her the truth. In addition, the kings are accompanied by their Page. They tell her that they need lodging for the night, and she welcomes them in. One of the kings—Kaspar—is hard of hearing and in other ways a comic character as well. The kings explain that they cannot stay very long because they do not want to lose sight of their star.

Amahl's mother leaves to obtain wood for the fire, telling Amahl not to bother the kings, an order he quickly ignores. After a brief interchange with Balthazar, in which Amahl describes his mother's plan to go begging, concluding with "Won't it be fun?" Balthazar replies, "It has its points." Amahl then notices that Kaspar is feeding his parrot and also is carrying a box with three drawers, which attracts his curiosity. In a wonderful comic aria, Kaspar describes the box's contents.

The mother arrives with the firewood and instructs Amahl to ask the neighbors to bring some food for the kings, since she has no food in the house. The kings explain that the treasures that they are carrying are for "the Child." In the opera's most elaborate "set piece," the kings describe the Child whom they seek, and the mother says that Amahl has many of the characteristics that they describe, but "no one will bring him incense or gold/Though sick and poor and hungry and cold." The orchestra builds to a crescendo to heighten the drama of this quartet before the opera turns to more mundane matters.

The neighborhood shepherds arrive, greeting each other, asking, "How are your children, and how are your sheep?" One by one, they offer food to the kings, who thank them profusely. Two young people are asked to dance for the kings. At first uncertain of themselves, they eventually warm to the task, and the music accelerates—in a form known as a tarantella-- to accompany their newfound enthusiasm. The kings regretfully cut the festivities short, as they have a long way to go. Amahl asks Kaspar if he might have a magic stone in his box that will cure a crippled boy, but Kaspar cannot hear him, and Amahl does not press the matter further. All of the people fall asleep, and the "tranquility theme" returns to indicate the passage of the night.

The first rays of sunshine appear the next morning. The mother looks at the gold the kings are transporting, and in the dramatic aria "All That Gold," she laments that rich people do not understand how much difference just a few coins can make in the life of a poor family. Repeating "for my child, for my child" she

reaches out for the gold, unfortunately waking the Page in the process. The Page grabs her arm and cries out “Thief,” waking the kings. Amahl leaps to his mother’s defense, trying to beat the Page and yelling childish cries such as “I’ll break all your bones! I’ll bash in your head.” As Amahl collapses from exhaustion, Kaspar signals to the Page to release his hold on the mother.

In a brief but moving aria, Melchior tells the mother that she can keep the gold, since the newborn child’s kingdom will be built on love. The first part of this aria is accompanied in the orchestra by the “tranquility theme.” Saying, “For such a king I’ve waited all my life,” she returns the gold, adding a wish that she could afford to send a gift of her own. Over her initial objection, Amahl offers to send the Child his most treasured possession, his crutch. Miraculously, he discovers that he can walk without it. As the kings declare that this miracle is a sign from the Child, Amahl dances around the room, singing “Look mother, I can dance.” Amahl tells his mother that he wants to go with the kings to present the crutch personally to the Child, and the kings promise to return him home safely.

Mother and child sing a fond farewell with requests that are comic in their banality—“Feed my bird,” “Brush your teeth,” etc. As they depart on their journey, a chorus of shepherds proclaim the “sweet dawn of peace,” and a brief repetition of the shepherd’s pipe melody, followed by the farewell duet, provides a quiet ending to the opera.

GIAN CARLO MENOTTI

Gian Carlo Menotti (zhan KAR-lo me-NOH-tee) (1911-2007) may well be America’s most popular and most significant opera composer, despite the fact that he was born in Italy and never gave up his Italian citizenship. As is the case with most successful composers, his musical talent was apparent at an early age. His mother was a talented musician, and she saw to it that all of her children learned to play musical instruments, and the family frequently gave concerts at their home. He composed his first opera

at age 11, which was performed in his home as a puppet show. By age 13 he was studying at the Milan conservatory, and he frequently attended the world-famous La Scala opera house, located in that city.

Following the family's relocation to South America, he moved to the U.S. to study at Philadelphia's Curtis institute, where he met Samuel Barber, with whom he formed a long-time romantic relationship (which lasted until 1970), as well as a professional one. In fact, they collaborated on one of the greatest American operas of the mid-Twentieth century, "Vanessa," for which Menotti, despite the fact that English was his second language, wrote the libretto for Barber's music.

In 1937 he wrote his first mature opera, "Amelia Goes to the Ball," a one-act comedy, which was produced by several opera companies, including the New York Metropolitan Opera. This led to a commission from the NBC network to write one of the first operas ever composed for a radio audience, "The Old Maid and the Thief." This opera remains popular today. (By way of comparison, performances of the first two operas of Verdi and Puccini are hardly ever heard). In fact, a few years ago the Kansas City Lyric Opera's Exploration series performed the opera in a simulated radio studio. Two arias from this opera—"Steal Me, Sweet Thief" and "When the Air Smells of Summer"—are popular recital and audition pieces. Following some work on non-operatic projects, he returned to opera in 1946 with the work that some consider to be his greatest achievement, "The Medium," the story of a phony psychic who begins to wonder if there really are evil spirits who are attacking her as revenge for her false claims. Though this opera is in two acts, it is still too short for a full evening's entertainment, so Menotti composed a one-act opera to accompany it, "The Telephone," with a plot that resonates more today than it did when it first appeared, about a woman so obsessed with her telephone conversations that her boyfriend cannot get a word in edgewise to propose marriage. This twin-bill had its first professional run not at the Met but on Broadway, a venue to which Menotti returned in 1950 with "The

Consul,” a powerful story of a woman trying to fight the bureaucracy in order to escape an oppressive regime in her country. This opera won Menotti a Pulitzer Prize, and the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award for best musical.

Having written for both radio and Broadway, in 1951 Menotti was offered the opportunity to try another unusual venue when NBC commissioned him to write a Christmas opera to be televised Christmas Eve. “Amahl and the Night Visitors” was the first opera ever composed specifically for that medium. It was so popular that for several years telecasts of this opera in the Christmas season became a tradition for the network. Since then it has received countless live performances and is almost certainly the most frequently performed American opera.

In 1956 another Menotti opera, “The Saint of Bleeker Street,” which, like “The Consul,” had its premiere on Broadway, gained Menotti another Pulitzer. Though Menotti composed twenty-five operas in all, as well as several non-operatic works, none of the later works achieved the fame of his those from his early period, despite many of them receiving critical acclaim at the time. In 1986 Washington (DC) opera produced Menotti’s “Goya,” based on the life of the famous painter, starring the renowned tenor Placido Domingo in the title role, who accepted the assignment when Menotti assured him that there would be real arias for him to sing, unlike the situation in many American operas of the period. The opera was widely publicized and was televised nationally. Unfortunately, the critics were, to say the least, unimpressed, and the opera has received few additional productions.

In addition to his work as a composer/librettist, Menotti made several other contributions to world music. He returned to the Curtis Institute to teach for several years. In 1958 he founded the Festival of Two Worlds in Spoleto, Italy, and he subsequently founded the Spoleto Festival USA in Charlestown, SC.

Menotti died February 1, 2007, at age 95, in Monte Carlo, Monaco.

THE MAGI

Many people who believe that they know the story of the three kings who came to visit baby Jesus would be surprised to learn that much of their story comes from post-Biblical sources. The only canonical Gospel writer who mentions them is Matthew (chapter 2), and in Matthew's account they are described as "wise men," not kings, and their number is unspecified. Moreover, it seems doubtful that Matthew believed that they arrived on the night of Jesus's birth, since when they arrive in Jerusalem (and are subsequently re-routed to Bethlehem), Jesus has already been born. Their number (3) and their status as kings appears to be based on later church teachings that interpreted certain Old Testament passages as predicting Jesus' birth. In fact, some translations refer to them as astrologers. Their names, as used in this opera, can be traced back to a Greek document from about 500 A.D.

Nevertheless, artistic depictions of the Magi throughout the ages have followed the European tradition that there were three of them, all kings, and that they first beheld the infant Jesus in the manger where he was born. Many such depictions include a snow-covered landscape, more typical of Europe than of the Middle East. Without these colorful additions to Matthew's account, we would not have the Bosch painting that inspired this wonderful opera.

Note: Some material for this post was obtained from *Wikipedia* and from John Ardoin's book *The Stages of Menotti* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985)