

Amahl and the Night Visitors by Gian Carlo Menotti (1911–2007)

Gian Carlo Menotti was born in the Italian village of Cadegliano near the Swiss border. His father was a prosperous businessman and his mother was musical. His talents were apparent early; he was writing songs at seven and wrote his first opera at eleven. His first formal training was at the Milan Conservatory. When his father died, his mother got him accepted as a student at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia. His fellow students included Leonard Bernstein and Samuel Barber.

When he left the Curtis in 1933, he began composing his first mature opera, *Amelia al Ballo*. This was inspired by stories of her youth told to him by his landlady during a visit to Vienna. It was first performed at the Philadelphia Academy of Music in 1935 and was so successful that the New York Met staged it the following year. This led to a commission from NBC for a radio opera, *The Old Man and the Thief*, Menotti's first English libretto, performed in 1939. His next opera, *The Island God* (1942), was a flop, and he composed no more operas until 1945, when *The Medium* ran for more than 200 performances on Broadway.

Menotti's most critically acclaimed work was *The Consul* (1950) which ran for eight months and for which he won both a Pulitzer Prize and the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for musical plays. In 1955 he won the same awards for *The Saint of Bleeker Street*. His most popular work was the Christmas opera *Amahl and the Night Visitors* (1951). His last opera (the 25th) was composed in 1993, but he was still conducting operas in his 90s. Menotti also composed numerous choral works, concertos for violin and for piano, a symphony, a stage play, and several ballets. In 1958, he founded the Festival of Two Worlds in Spoleto, Italy and a similar festival in Charleston, South Carolina in 1977. These were intended to bring opera to a popular audience.

In 1974, Menotti bought a baronial home in Scotland at the foot of Lammermoor. He explained,

There are three reasons why I live in Scotland. First, I like silence and you have to be a millionaire to buy silence in Italy. Second, I like cold weather. Third, in Italy I have too many relatives and know too many people so I never get a quiet time.

Gian Carlo Menotti died in February of 2007 at the age of 95.



Gian Carlo Menotti
(1957)



Adoration of the Magi
(Bosch, 1510)

Amahl and the Night Visitors was commissioned by NBC for the first Hallmark Hall of Fame performance on Christmas Eve, 1951. It was extremely successful and became an annual television tradition. In 1952 it was broadcast at Easter as well as Christmas. After 1966, it wasn't shown again on television until 1978 when a new production starring Teresa Stratas was shown by NBC, partly filmed on location in the Holy Land. But there have been thousands of stage performances by both amateur and professional groups.

The story is set in the Holy Land near Bethlehem just before Christmas. Amahl is a disabled shepherd boy with an active imagination. His mother doesn't believe him when he sees an amazing star in the sky. Later, the Magi, on their way to find Jesus, come to the house and ask to rest.

That night, the mother, distraught at the prospect of her boy living for the rest of his life as a beggar, attempts to steal some of the gold intended for the Christ child, but she is caught by the King's page. King Melchior realizes that the mother's motive is to help her crippled child and allows her to keep the gold. But she, wishing to give a present to the Holy Child, returns it because she has nothing else to offer. Amahl too wishes to send a gift to the Holy Child, but can offer only his crutch. As he does so, his leg is miraculously cured, and he goes off with the kings to see the Holy Child.

Menotti's story was inspired by the 1510 painting *The Adoration of the Magi* by Hieronymus Bosch, a copy of which he had studied in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The television audience's reaction to the crippled boy at the centre of the story must have been influenced by the summer polio epidemics which, beginning in 1950, paralyzed or crippled thousands of young persons. The vaccine developed by Jonas Salk must have seemed as miraculous as Amahl's cure when it was announced in 1955.

Amahl and the Night Visitors is the most frequently performed opera of all time. Menotti was especially proud that his fable had introduced so many persons, especially young persons, to music.

***Gaudete* by Anders Öhrwall (b. 1932)**

Anders Öhrwall has been Music Director at the Adolf Frederik Church in Stockholm, Sweden since 1962. In 1964 he founded the Stockholm Bach Choir which has made several recordings under his direction, including a recording of the Bach motets with Nicholas Harnoncourt and the Concentus Musicus Wien.

The choral suite *Gaudete* is mostly based on songs from a collection known as *Piae Cantiones* (holy songs) first published in 1582. In 1962, Öhrwall arranged nine of the songs from this collection, plus the English song *Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming*, for a performance by the Swedish Radio Youth Choir, accompanied by three wind instruments. The arrangements were published in 1968 and recorded in 1991 by Soli Deo Gloria Cantorum, conducted by Almeda Berkey. A performance of *Gaudete* by the Greenwood Singers conducted by Robert de Frece was featured on the Christmas Eve Choral Concert on CBC Radio in 2006.



Anders
Öhrwall