

The Pescadero Opera Society presents

# AM AHL

*and the Night Visitors*



**Music and Libretto  
by Gian Carlo Menotti**

**An Opera in One Act  
Sung in English**

**Setting: Peasant home  
Time: Biblical times**

## Characters

Amahl (boy soprano) ..... Bill McIver  
His Mother (soprano)..... Rosemary Kuhlmann  
King Melchior (baritone) ..... David Aiken  
King Balthazar (bass)..... Leon Lishner  
King Kaspar (slightly deaf), (tenor)..... Andrew McKinley  
The Page (baritone)..... Francis Monachino  
Three Peasants (dancers)..... John Butler, Glen Tetley, Carmen Gutierrez

Conducted by Thomas Schipper  
The Symphony of the Air Orchestra

Première performance on NBC Television Opera Theatre on December 24, 1951  
This live telecast was given December 25, 1955.

## Synopsis



Amahl, a crippled shepherd boy, about 12 years old, is heard playing a tune on his flute outside of his house. His mother tells him that it's time to go to bed. He delays as long as possible but, after being scolded by his mother, he finally takes his crutch and hobbles inside. Amahl tells his mother of a large bright star in the sky. She refuses to believe him, complaining that he is always making up tales.

After Amahl and his mother go to sleep, voices are heard in the distance. There is a knock at the door and Amahl is sent to see who it is. He hastily returns and informs his mother that there are three kings at the door. Not believing him, she goes to the door herself and is stunned to discover that Amahl is, in fact, telling the truth — there *are* three kings at the door! The kings request lodging for the evening. The mother explains that she is a poor widow and, though a bed of straw is all she has to offer them, they are welcome to stay. The kings enter the house. They tell Amahl and his mother of the Child they seek and display the gifts they are bearing to his birthplace, led on their journey by a great star.

Amahl is sent to wake the other shepherds and to have them bring food and firewood for their regal guests. The shepherds arrive and present the kings with gifts of food and dance for them. The kings thank them graciously and wish all a good night.

After the shepherds have left, the household settles down to sleep. The mother, not yet asleep, sees the magnificent gold to be given to the Christ child — a child they don't even know — and decides, for the sake of her own child, that she must take some of the gold. As she attempts to grab some gold she is caught by the page, who alerts the kings. Amahl tries to defend his mother, beating the page with his crutch.

The kings forgive the mother and prepare to leave on their journey. Amahl wishes to send something to the Christ child himself and offers the kings the only thing he has — his crutch. Suddenly a miracle occurs! Amahl is able to walk on his own and no longer needs his crutch to support him. The kings invite Amahl to join them on their journey to bring gifts to the King of Peace. Amahl and his mother say their farewells, and he and the kings leave together on their journey.

## Gian Carlo Menotti

**Born in Cadegliano, Italy on July 7, 1911**

**Died February 1, 2007 in Monte Carlo, Monaco**



Gian Carlo Menotti was born in the mountain village of Cadegliano in northern Italy. At the age of 7, under the guidance of his mother, he began to compose songs. Four years later he wrote the words and music of his first opera, *The Death of Pierrot*. In 1923, at the age of 12, he began his formal musical training at the Verdi Conservatory in Milan.

After the death of his father, in 1928, Menotti's mother took him to the United States, where he was enrolled at Philadelphia's Curtis Institute of Music. There he completed his musical studies, working under Rosario Scalero.

Menotti's first mature work, the one-act opera buffa, *Amelia Goes to the Ball*, was premiered in 1937, a success that led to a commission from the National Broadcasting Company to write an opera especially for radio, *The Old Maid and the Thief*. It was the first such commission ever given. His first ballet, *Sebastian*, followed in 1944, in which he wrote the scenario as well as the score. After the premiere of his *Piano Concerto* in 1945, Menotti returned to opera with *The Medium*, shortly joined by *The Telephone*. They both enjoyed international success.

*The Consul*, Menotti's first full-length work, won the Pulitzer Prize and the New York Drama Critics Circle award as the best musical play of the year in 1954. By far Menotti's best-known work is the Christmas classic *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, composed for NBC-TV in 1951. This beloved opera celebrated the 50th anniversary of its premiere in 2001.

Menotti wrote the text to all his operas, the original language being English in every case, with the exception of *Amelia Goes to the Ball*, *The Island God* and *The Last Savage*, which were first written in Italian. Recent operas include *The Singing Child* (1993) and *Goya* (1986), written for Plácido Domingo and given its premiere by The Washington Opera. Menotti's most recent vocal works are *Jacob's Prayer* (1997), a commission from the American Choral Directors Association, *Gloria*, written as part of a composite Mass celebrating the 1995 Nobel Peace Prize, *For the Death of Orpheus*, with a premiere by the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra led by Robert Shaw in November 1990, and *Llama de Amor Viva*, premiered in April 1991.

In addition to the numerous operatic works, Menotti has enriched the artistic world with ballets, including *Errand into the Maze*, and *The Unicorn, the Gorgon, and the Manticore*; *Pastorale for Piano and Strings* (1934); *Poemetti*, a suite of piano pieces for children (1937); *The Hero* (1952), a song on a text by Robert Horan; and *Canti della Lontananza*, a cycle of seven songs (1967).

In 1958, Menotti founded "The Festival of Two Worlds" in Spoleto, Italy, which became one the most important music festivals in the world. Musicians and artists come from all over the world to perform and to listen to musical works by some of world's best artists. In 1977, he expanded the Spoleto Festival to Charleston, South Carolina (now the Festival indeed was in two worlds!) where he continued to write and direct new operas and plays.

In 1984 Menotti was awarded the Kennedy Center Honor for lifetime achievement in the arts, one of the highest honors given to an American artist. In 1991, in honor of his 80th birthday, he was chosen the "Musician of the Year" by *Musical America*, inaugurating worldwide tributes to the composer. In July 1996 Menotti wrote a trio for the Verdehr Trio, which received its world premiere at the Spoleto Festival on his 85th birthday. Menotti died on February 1, 2007, at the age of 95, in a hospital in Monte Carlo, Monaco, where he had a home. (He thought it would be "naughty" to die in Monte Carlo.)

## ***Amahl and the Night Visitors***

*Amahl and the Night Visitors* is based on a story in the Bible's book of Matthew, which tells of how Magi, or wise men, traveled to find a new king whose arrival was predicted in ancient writings. They were guided to their destination by an unusual star in the sky.

In 1951 the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) commissioned the 40-year-old Menotti to write a Christmas opera for this new form of entertainment. However, he could not come up with a subject. He despaired, until one day, while strolling through the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, he chanced upon and was inspired by the famous painting, *The Adoration of the Magi*, by Flemish Renaissance artist, Hieronymus Bosch. However, it has also been written that the real inspiration for his opera was a miraculous visit to the Sanctuary of Sacro Monte, where Menotti, himself as a young boy, was cured of lameness. Menotti wrote the libretto for *Amahl and the Night Visitors* and, in less than two months, Menotti finished the score. He wrote into it some of the magical sounds he remembered from his youth during St. Nicholas's festive visits to his mountain village in Italy where he was born.

It was Menotti's express wish that the role of Amahl should always be performed by a boy — never substituted by a woman dressed as a child. In operas of the 18th and 19th centuries the roles of young boys and adolescents were often sung by women, because a woman's voice resembled a boy's unchanged treble voice. These were called "trouser roles." This practice went out of fashion in the 20th century, and composers like Benjamin Britten and Menotti wrote opera roles that children could sing without harming their developing voices. The role of *Amahl* is written in a range that a talented boy soprano can easily sing.

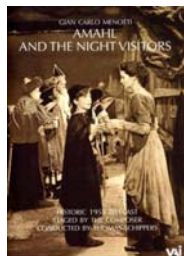
*Amahl*, which is sung in English, is less than an hour in length. Its beautiful score and touching libretto appeal is immediately appealing to people of all ages and musical backgrounds, and especially to young imaginations who can easily relate to a child with a head full of dreams. The music is lyrical and beautiful; the action is not without its humorous moments, and the message (the wondrous power of love) is quite evident and moving.

Musically, *Amahl* is a masterpiece of brevity and economy of resources. Menotti's is the style of Italian opera — romantic and full of melody. The composer's directions for the opera call for costumes and a setting "suggesting Italian peasants," and the only oriental impression comes from Amahl's piping and the answering piping from distant shepherds. The piping requires two oboes and single winds consisting of flute, clarinet, trumpet, horn, with piano, harp and strings. Menotti's vocal style is quite verbal — that is, the rhythm of the spoken words influences the rhythm and the inflection of the sung melodies, which often helps make the words easy to understand. In the dance sequence the rhythm is a tarantella, an Italian folk dance.

*Amahl and the Night Visitors* was first presented on December 24, 1951 as the first Hallmark Hall of Fame program, and was directed by Menotti himself. It has the distinction of being the first opera written expressly for television. It was so widely praised that it became a tradition, running on Christmas Eve for the next sixteen years. The 1953 presentation of *Amahl* was the first commercial television program broadcast in full color. For years *Amahl* was televised live, but in 1963 it was videotaped with an all-new cast, and this version was televised from 1963-1966. It was absent from television until 1978 when a new version was presented, filmed by NBC partly on location in the Holy Land.

*Amahl* is considered to be one of the most popular American operas, and remains one of the most frequently performed operas of the 20th century. It is often performed internationally during the Christmas season. It is probably safe to say that *Amahl and the Night Visitors* is the most performed opera in the world, having been performed more than 2,500 times, often by amateur companies and on high school stages, since it was created for television in 1951.

### **Amahl and the Night Visitors: Historic 1955 Telecast** **Starring Rosemary Kuhlmann, Bill McIver; Thomas Schippers, conducting**



*Amahl and the Night Visitors* is a made-for-TV opera and is a great vehicle for introducing opera to young, English-speaking audiences. The music and story are very moving and accessible. The singing and performance by all involved is heartfelt, if not occasionally a little over the top. For those unfamiliar with the story, this video beautifully captures the dynamics of the opera — the emotional tensions, the gap between the poor and the very rich, and the social milieu into which the Christ child was born. The protectiveness and frustration of the mother, the enthusiasm of Amahl (a child who is constantly excited by life) and the lives of the shepherds are clearly portrayed.

This original telecast was apparently captured and canned as-is — that is to say, no studio overdubbing — therefore, the lyrics are often hard to understand. What this performance does have is a dramatically staged version by the composer, a hand-chosen conductor, a soprano who, by all accounts, was the composer's ideal, a fine trio of Kings, an ensemble which is one of the tightest ever heard. Bill McIver, who plays the role of Amahl, combines vulnerability, sweetness and strength in every way possible. In spite of the limitations of 1950s TV, the sound and video quality are very good, especially considering what the telecast was like — very genuine and moving.