

Choral Arts Society Program Notes – Amahl and the Night Visitors **By James Schatzman**

Today the Choral Arts Society presents one of my very favorite compositions, Amahl and the Night Visitors. It is an almost, magical composition in that it is based on the greatest story ever told as seen through the eyes of a typical little boy. I raised four boys and all of them have a bit of Amahl in them. Amahl is sweet, loving, tells a good story – sometimes true sometimes not. Most days you want to hug him and some days he can exasperate his mother to the end of her wits. There is an honesty and integrity about boyhood in this unique operatic character that makes me nostalgic for the youth of my own sons and also ignites a passion for my grandsons.

In this, the fourth time I have been a part of this production, once in the role of the page with the Racine Symphony Orchestra and three times as music director, I believe you too will see a bit of every boy in this character – a child who is precocious, fun loving, challenging, and dearly loved by God and his Mother.

Amahl and the Night Visitors is an opera in one act by Gian Carlo Menotti with an original English libretto (lyrics) also done by the composer. It was commissioned by NBC and first performed by the NBC Opera Theatre on December 24, 1951, in New York City, where it was broadcast live on television for the Hallmark Hall of Fame program. It is the first American opera commissioned and composed specifically for television.

Menotti is quoted as saying, "On television you're lucky if they ever repeat anything. Writing an opera is a big effort and to give it away for one performance is stupid." This comment certainly belies Menotti's pessimism for television executives. Menotti himself appeared in the television premiere to introduce the opera. Amahl was seen on thirty-five NBC affiliates coast to coast, the largest network hookup for an opera broadcast to that date. In spite of his initial pessimism, the opera drew a tremendously large audience. So much so, that it was shown every year for 16 consecutive years from 1951 – 1966. It was estimated that five million people saw the original live broadcast, likely the largest audience ever to see a televised opera. In 1963 the opera was taped for the first time and it ran from 1963-1966 after which NBC stopped presenting its annual production when the rights to perform it went back to the composer. In 1978 it was made into a new production was shot partly on location in the Holy Land starring Theresa Stratas and Willard White, reintroducing the opera to a whole new generation. It did not catch on the way it did in 1951 and was not run again. It may have been due to the fact that it was not a live performance, in that the music was recorded in a studio and the actors simply mimed their parts on the set. In live performance, however, it has remained popular and it is performed hundreds, if not thousands, of times annually all over the US.

I would like to conclude with a substantial quote from the original recording by the composer himself:

“This is an opera for children because it tries to recapture my own childhood. You see, when I was a child I lived in Italy, and in Italy we have no Santa Claus. I suppose that Santa Claus is much too busy with American children to be able to handle Italian children as well. Our gifts were brought to us by the Three Kings, instead.

I actually never met the Three Kings—it didn't matter how hard my little brother and I tried to keep awake at night to catch a glimpse of the Three Royal Visitors, we would always fall asleep just before

they arrived. But I do remember hearing them. I remember the weird cadence of their song in the dark distance; I remember the brittle sound of the camel's hooves crushing the frozen snow; and I remember the mysterious tinkling of their silver bridles.

My favorite king was King Melchior, because he was the oldest and had a long white beard. My brother's favorite was King Kaspar. He insisted that this king was a little crazy and quite deaf. I don't know why he was so positive about his being deaf. I suspect it was because dear King Kaspar never brought him all the gifts he requested. He was also rather puzzled by the fact that King Kaspar carried the myrrh, which appeared to him as a rather eccentric gift, for he never quite understood what the word meant.

To these Three Kings I mainly owe the happy Christmas seasons of my childhood and I should have remained very grateful to them. Instead, I came to America and soon forgot all about them, for here at Christmas time one sees so many Santa Clauses scattered all over town. Then there is the big Christmas tree in Rockefeller Plaza, the elaborate toy windows on Fifth Avenue, the one-hundred-voice choir in Grand Central Station, the innumerable Christmas carols on radio and television—and all these things made me forget the three dear old Kings of my old childhood.

But in 1951 I found myself in serious difficulty. I had been commissioned by the National Broadcasting Company to write an opera for television, with Christmas as deadline, and I simply didn't have one idea in my head. One November afternoon as I was walking rather gloomily through the rooms of the Metropolitan Museum, I chanced to stop in front of the Adoration of the Kings by Hieronymus Bosch, and as I was looking at it, suddenly I heard again, coming from the distant blue hills, the weird song of the Three Kings. I then realized they had come back to me and had brought me a gift.

I am often asked how I went about writing an opera for television, and what are the specific problems that I had to face in planning a work for such a medium. I must confess that in writing "Amahl and the Night Visitors," I hardly thought of television at all. As a matter of fact, all 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."

— Gian-Carlo Menotti

Synopsis:

Amahl, a shepherd, tries to tell his mother about what he has seen outside; an enormous star with a long tale. His mother, used to his habitual lying, grows angry; she is even angrier when Amahl tells her that a knock at the door is three kings come to visit them. The kings enter and tell the two peasants that they have come to find a king, and they show the rich gifts they have brought him. While Amahl's mother is out gathering wood for the fire, Amahl asks the kings questions about their lives. The mother returns with her neighbors, and the villagers present their gifts to the visitors. That night, Amahl's mother tries to steal some of the kings' gold to use to help her child; she is caught, and when the kings offer to let her keep the gold, explaining that the king they seek will need nothing but love to rule his kingdom, she returns it. Amahl offers his staff as an additional gift, and suddenly finds that he can walk. He leaves with the kings to pay homage to the child who has healed him.