

ALLA CORRENTE

Amahl and the Night Visitors

When I was a young lad around 1958 or so, I saw my very first opera. I had heard opera music on old phonograph records my parents and grandparents owned (old 78s!), but I had never witnessed the full panoply of opera staging, acting and movement until I saw for the first time *Amahl and the Night Visitors* on TV. Yes, I said on TV and not a PBS station that one might expect today, but on a major network....NBC! Every Christmas since, I have remembered my fascination with that opera, and have tried to watch it whenever it was broadcast. It whetted my appetite to attend other operas, and, although I'm not as much of an aficionado as some members of Il Cenacolo are, I have grown to enjoy the opera experience when I have had the opportunity to attend a performance.

So, my Christmastide "ALLA CORRENTE" this year is about *Amahl and the Night Visitors* and Gian Carlo Menotti (1911-2007), its Italian-American composer. *Amahl* is an opera written in one act with an original English libretto by Menotti himself. It was commissioned by NBC and was first performed by the NBC Opera Theatre on December 24, 1951 in New York City, at NBC Studio 8H in Rockefeller Center, where it was broadcast live on television as the debut production of the Hallmark Hall of Fame. It was the first opera specifically composed for television in the US. The opera became a popular Christmas classic over the years, and sought to bring opera back to the working masses, from which classic Italian opera sprang in the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries.

Peter Herman Adler, director of NBC's new opera programming, commissioned Menotti to write the first opera for television. The composer had trouble finding a subject for the opera, but eventually took his inspiration from viewing Hieronymus Bosch's famous Renaissance (16th Century) painting--"The Adoration of the Magi"-- a piece of art that hung in The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

As the airdate neared, (in typical composer fashion) Menotti still had not completed the score. The singers had little time to rehearse, and only received the final passages of the score just several days before the broadcast. The composer's companion Samuel Barber was brought in to help Menotti complete the orchestrations. After the dress rehearsal, NBC Symphony conductor Arturo Toscanini told Menotti "This is the best you've ever done." (Certainly high praise from one of the most formidable and domineering classical conductors of the 20th century!!)

Menotti wrote *Amahl* with the stage in mind, even though it was intended for broadcast. As Menotti put it: "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." The composer appeared on-screen in the premiere to introduce the opera and give the background of the events leading up to its composition. He also brought out director Kirk Browning and conductor Thomas Schippers to thank them on-screen.

Amahl was seen on 35 NBC affiliates coast to coast, the largest network hookup for an opera broadcast to that date. An estimated five million people saw the live broadcast. (Try fitting that many people into the Met or War Memorial Opera House for a single performance!!)

The Synopsis of the Opera: (Menotti distinctly wanted *Amahl* to be performed by a boy. In the production notes contained in the Piano-Vocal score he wrote: "It is the express wish of the composer that the role of Amahl should always be performed by a boy. Neither the musical nor the dramatic concept of the opera permits the substitution of a woman costumed as a child." All subsequent portrayals of *Amahl* were performed by boy singers).

Continued next page . . .

ALLA CORRENTE, *Continued*
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Continued from previous page . . .

The opera takes place near Bethlehem, sometime during the 1st century CE, just after the birth of Jesus. Although he is a kind and pleasant youth, Amahl, a disabled boy who can walk only with the aid of a crutch, has a problem with telling tall tales -- and, occasionally, lies. He is sitting outside playing his shepherd's pipe when his mother calls for him (*Amahl! Amahl!*). After much persuasion, he enters the house but his mother doesn't believe him when he tells her that there is an amazing star "as big as a window" outside, over their roof.

Later that night, Amahl's mother weeps for her son, praying that he not become a beggar. After bedtime, there is a knock at the door and his mother tells him to go see who it is. He is amazed when he sees three splendidly dressed Kings (the Magi). They tell the Mother and Amahl that they are on a long journey to give gifts to a wondrous Child, and that they would like to rest at their house, to which the mother agrees. Amahl's mother goes to get firewood and Amahl begins to speak with the Magi. King Balthazar patiently answers Amahl's questions about his life as a King and, in return asks what Amahl does. Amahl responds that he was once a shepherd, but his mother had to sell his sheep--now he and his mother will have to endure a life of begging. Amahl then talks with King Kaspar, who is childlike, eccentric, and a bit deaf. Kaspar shows Amahl his box of "magic" stones, beads, and licorice, and offers Amahl some of the candy. Amahl's mother returns and tells Amahl to fetch all the surrounding neighbors so that the Kings could be properly fed and entertained.

After the neighbors have left, and the Kings are resting, the mother, poor and heartsick at the thought of her child becoming a beggar, attempts to steal some of the Kings' gold that was meant for the Christ Child. She is thwarted by the Kings' page. When Amahl wakes to find the page grabbing his mother, he attacks him in order to save her. Seeing Amahl's weak defense for his mother, and understanding the mother's motives for the attempted theft, King Melchior announces that she may keep the gold, as the Holy Child will not need earthly power or wealth to build his kingdom.

The mother says that she has waited for such a King all her life, and asks that the Kings take back the gold. She wishes to send a gift but has nothing to send. Amahl, too, has nothing to give the Christ Child except his crutch, but he offers it. He holds it out as an offering to the Kings, and immediately his leg is miraculously healed. He joyfully leaves his mother at the cottage and goes off with the Magi to see the Child and give his crutch in thanks for being healed.

-Dr. James J. Boitano, with excerpts adapted from Wikipedia