



Features

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## Changing Fortunes

**BARRY SINGER** assesses the legacy of Gian Carlo Menotti, whose *Saint of Bleecker Street* arrives this month at Central City Opera.



**Menotti in rehearsal for *The Medium*, 1947**

(<http://www.operanews.org/uploaded/image/article/menottimedlg7107.jpg>)

Menotti in rehearsal for *The Medium*, 1947

could sell.

Of course, no one at the top knew precisely what such an opera should sound like. Menotti showed them. His first, *Amelia al Ballo*, was a frolicsome Puccini send-up with dark undercurrents - a mixture of diversion and dire foreboding for an American audience consumed by the oncoming conflagration in Europe. Written in Italian, with orchestrations of gratifying grandiosity, Menotti's "modern" opera was still an easy stretch for traditionalists. As a

When Gian Carlo Menotti first surfaced, in 1937, as a twenty-five-year-old Italian-born prodigy from the shores of Lake Lugano in Lombardy, by way of the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, the world of American opera was waiting for him - or for someone, *anyone* like him. The Depression had taken down a number of America's major companies, including the Chicago Opera, and had pummeled the Metropolitan Opera to the brink of bankruptcy. Accessibility was suddenly a paramount concern within these infamously elitist institutions - accessibility in the populist sense of new social equality for potential ticket-buyers, but also in the hardcore marketing sense. American opera companies needed new operas they

Deep down, Menotti was no rebel.



**Muriel Dickson in the Met premiere of Menotti's *Amelia Goes to the Ball*, 1938**

(<http://www.operanews.org/uploaded/image/article/dicksonamelialg7107.jpg>)

Muriel Dickson in the Met premiere of Menotti's *Amelia Goes to the Ball*, 1938

one-act, it also was an easy leap for opera newcomers, a bauble about a pampered young thing who just wants to dance at the ball, winds up gunning down her lover (in front of her husband) to do so, and gets away with it. Tonal yet harmonically astringent, tightly constructed around a chic, familiar setting but with a witty, pretension-deflating sensibility, it charmed many critics too.

For all of these reasons, Menotti and his opera were fast-tracked. After its premiere in April 1937 at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia, on a benefit evening for Menotti's alma mater, *Amelia al Ballo* was taken up by the Curtis Institute's founder, Mary Curtis Bok, who immediately underwrote a well-received showcase performance in New York. Within a year, *Amelia* was at the Metropolitan Opera (in English), on a double bill with, of all things, Richard Strauss's *Elektra*.

From the Met's point of view at that moment, *Amelia* had it all - one set, seven characters, arias, laughs and a composer who seemed to have it all too, blessed with youth, Italian lineage and innate opera-writing talent. As *The New York Times*'s Howard Taubman wrote after *Amelia*'s initial New York performance, "His music has the style and glitter of the operatic composers of his native land. The turn of a phrase here and there bears the stamp of distinguished Italian forebears, but the essential vitality, ingenuity and laughter are the composer's own.... Mr. Menotti knows how to toss off a shapely tune. He knows how to whip up tumultuous climaxes. He knows how to write for voice."

One can easily imagine the current Met general manager, Peter Gelb, turning to a Menotti of his own, as he tackles anew the Met's socio-economic problems, just as his long-ago predecessor Edward Johnson did. Gelb's Menotti would be a Juilliard kid, perhaps, with a hot new one-act opera full of sex and violence - tonal yet harmonically astringent, tightly constructed around a chic, familiar setting but with a witty, pretension-deflating sensibility - all packaged for HD simulcast.

It is more difficult (though not impossible) to imagine Gelb turning to Gian Carlo Menotti's operas for salvation. Menotti, who died in February of this year at the age of ninety-five, went on from *Amelia al Ballo* to become America's most prolific, widely performed and widely disdained opera composer, through works such as *The Medium*, *The Consul* and his Christmas perennial, *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. (Gelb, who has called Menotti "one of America's greatest composers," also has publicly stated that the original television broadcast of *Amahl* "convinced" him "about opera as a young child.")



**Catherine Malfitano as Annina in Francis Rizzo's New York City Opera staging of *The Saint of Bleeker Street*, 1976, with Jeanne Piland (Desideria)**  
<http://www.operanews.org/uploaded/image/article/malfitanolg7107.jpg>  
 Catherine Malfitano as Annina in Francis Rizzo's New York City Opera staging of *The Saint of Bleeker Street*, 1976, with Jeanne Piland (Desideria)



Ruth Kobart (Agata) and Richard Cross (Donato) in Broadway's *leagues with *Amelia al Ballo*, hasn't staged one of his operas since the 1964 production of *The Last Savage*. What could be*  
*Maria Golovin*, 1958  
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more unfashionable in opera today than the name Gian Carlo Menotti? Yet his career constitutes a virtual blueprint for grabbing that Holy Grail pursued by opera companies worldwide: how to sell contemporary opera to the masses. Menotti knew.

"I confess, I was initially underwhelmed," says Pat Pearce, general and artistic director of Colorado's Central City Opera, which this summer will mount a new production of Menotti's *The Saint of Bleeker Street*, directed by Menotti alumna Catherine Malfitano. "*The Saint of Bleeker Street* was one piece I wasn't terribly familiar with, and even after listening to the commercial recordings available, I just didn't get it. Then Catherine Malfitano came here to direct *Madama Butterfly*. Catherine's big break as a singer had been playing Annina in a 1978 New York City Opera production of *Saint* that was broadcast on PBS. Catherine got me a copy of the broadcast, and it was breathtaking. 'That's what I want to do!' I said."

Opera broadcasts, of course, were a Menotti signature; several of his best-known works were created not for the stage but for television and, before that, radio. In the immediate aftermath of *Amelia al Ballo*, NBC commissioned him to write the very first original opera for radio. The result was *The Old Maid and the Thief*, "a grotesque opera in fourteen scenes," according to Menotti. Its libretto was in English this time, by the composer, who from this point on would write all of his librettos. It had its premiere on April 22, 1939, over the NBC Blue Network and was probably heard by more people that night than the sum total of ticket-buyers for a full Met season. Again, Menotti showed a crafty melding of old and new, layering opera buffa style over a kinky sexual triangle between a spinster, her maid and a thieving, irresistible Neanderthal of a man. He encrusted his libretto with music that echoed *Amelia* in its sardonic, Puccini-esque lyricism - but on an ingenious pocket-sized orchestral scale.

What Menotti grasped from the outset was elemental: to have any chance at being heard as a

contemporary opera composer, it was best to be both an ironic traditionalist musically and an ironic provocateur in terms of subject matter. This truth still holds today, as so many composers, from Adams and Adès through Corigliano and Heggie, might attest. For them, as for Menotti, the dominant modes of modernism - atonality and serialism - are merely accessories in their largely tonal and melodic musical palettes. Even more significant, the stories their librettos tell often are unlikely, even lurid, subjects for opera treatment. This was Menotti's early calling card. He always tried to be somewhat shocking, though never very dangerous. Deep down, Menotti was no rebel.



Leo Coleman (Toby), Marie Powers (Flora) and Evelyn Keller (Monica) in *The Medium* on Broadway, 1947

Arn Glantz/*OPERA NEWS* Archives

reside as much with Menotti's weaknesses as his own librettist as it does with his limitations as a composer. Menotti loved melodrama as a launching pad for his music. Of course, melodramatic histrionics have propelled operas from time immemorial. Rampant melodrama in a modern work, however, can make present-day opera administrators (if not their audiences) squirm. Menotti also relished paranoia as a driving engine for his dramaturgy. In the McCarthy era and the authority-questioning '60s that followed, this paranoia played big. But it has withered with the years, not because we are today remotely beyond paranoia, but rather because we have become *so* defined by paranoia and, in part, inured to it that Menotti's heavy-handed onstage reliance on it now seems pat, clichéd and even cheap.

That Menotti composed in the hyper-traditional "verismo" style of Puccini (with "modern" flourishes) was reassuring to postwar audiences. For listeners today, it can sound musty and derivative, flattening characters into anachronistic sketch-comedy caricatures - opera singers dressed as average folks but emoting like divas. Even for certain critics of the moment, this quality was self-evident. "At no time do his characters live," wrote *The New York Times's* Olin Downes of *The Medium*. "They are figures designed for a Grand Guignol climax, tinged with vaguely symbolic and Freudian implications.... The score is full of all sorts of musical derivations, from Puccini to Schoenberg and back again."

*The Medium* is a moody two-act work about a bogus séance huckster and the paranoid guilt that

He hit his stride during the decade immediately following World War II, producing works so accessible they landed him on Broadway. First *The Medium* transferred there, after having its premiere at Columbia University in 1946, running for 211 performances alongside a curtain-raiser Menotti called *The Telephone* - a cute single act for two lovers and one telephone, plus small orchestra. *The Consul* (1950) and *The Saint of Bleeker Street* (1954) followed - both written specifically for Broadway. Each won Menotti a Pulitzer Prize.

These remain some of the most popularly received American operas ever created. Why they are rarely performed today seems to



destroys her, along with her complicit daughter and the mute street naïf who is bound to them. *The Consul* is a moody three-act exercise in noir-drenched paranoia that captures the Cold War zeitgeist of 1950 via one desperate woman's doomed attempt to secure a visa and escape a generic Eastern Bloc-ish country. Menotti's craftsmanship in each is impeccable, his ability to shape a story with music expert. Neither work has matured comfortably, though. *The Medium* resounds today as a sung-through *Twilight Zone* episode. *The Consul* was timely enough in 1950 to win the Pulitzer and would seem, in terms of subject matter alone, a candidate for timelessness. But as Olin Downes wrote then in what was a rave review, "*The Consul* is as contemporary as the cold war, surrealism, television, [and] the atom bomb." Precisely.

The true pioneering innovation of both works remains their chamber-orchestra scale. With *The Medium* and *The Consul* (*The Old Maid and the Thief* and *The Telephone* as well), Menotti virtually invented the twentieth-century chamber opera - a hugely democratizing force for opera performance that was easy on both the English-speaking voice and opera-company budgets. In fact, that chamber scale may be Menotti's most sizeable contribution to modern opera development: concocting operas that were easy to produce and that even untutored American audiences could grasp. For nearly half a century, this ease of scale, if nothing else, was enough to make Menotti operas favorites of opera companies everywhere. But no longer.



Rosemary Kuhlmann and Chet Allen in the 1951 premiere of *Amahl and the Night Visitors*  
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melodies and, most obviously, the limitless appetite for melodrama. *The Saint of Bleeker Street* also best expresses Menotti's dual love of Italian and American culture - the same love that would soon give birth to his "Festival of Two Worlds" in Spoleto, Italy, and Charleston, South Carolina.

Menotti's saintly title character is an orphaned young invalid girl who bears the mark of the stigmata, and whose heart (and visions) belongs wholly to the Church. She lives in a cold-water flat with her fiercely non-believing older brother. Menotti offers these siblings up operatically as dueling embodiments of pious devotion and rational disbelief (tinged with a titillating touch of latent incest), but the characters transcend their symbolism, because Menotti knows them well and writes music that fully brings them to life. Their struggle echoes Menotti's conflicted sense of his

Menotti always denied the categorization (if not the accusation) that he was a writer of verismo, but *The Saint of Bleeker Street* is exactly that and, as a result, may well be his most satisfying opera creation. Musically derived from *Tosca*, Menotti's *Saint* nevertheless sings with its own voice, one well-suited to the characters Menotti gives voice to - the unregenerate urban peasants of New York's Little Italy. Most of Menotti's mannerisms work in *The Saint of Bleeker Street* because they are mannerisms that belong as well to his passion-driven, superstition-bound Italian-American characters - the turgid emotions, the weakness for simple, old Italian

own Catholicism - another reason the piece rings true. Menotti's music for *The Saint of Bleeker Street* doesn't merely dramatize the story; it inhabits it.

Still, *The Saint of Bleeker Street* is seldom performed today. Perhaps this is because, at curtain, Menotti comes down on the side of the saint. "Modern" operas aren't supposed to do that. The music is also Menotti at his most stentorian, with steaming arias and teeming choruses - fashionable only if one's name actually is Puccini.

Discernible here in Menotti's colloquial grand opera are the outlines of Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story* score soon to come. Not only did *The Saint of Bleeker Street* lay the groundwork for an all-out urban Broadway opera three years before *West Side Story*'s arrival; Bernstein later tacitly acknowledged its musical impact on him.

"So Menotti wrote like Puccini! So what!" says American contralto Lili Chookasian, who sang in a number of Menotti operas, including the Metropolitan Opera premiere of *The Last Savage* in 1964. "He knew how to write for the voice. He knew how to write music that sings. He knew what he was doing. Menotti knew how to put things together. And it was all heartfelt - he didn't work from the top of his head. Was he concerned with what people thought? From what I saw, he was very, very worried about it. Always."



Menotti's 1963 television opera, *Labyrinth*, with John Reardon (The Groom) and Judith Raskin (The Bride)  
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productions, directed by Menotti himself, of *Goya* at the Spoleto Festival in Italy and *The Saint of*

In the first eighteen years of his career, Gian Carlo Menotti wrote eight operas - seven of them notable crowd-pleasers, including the beloved *Amahl*. (The exception was *The Island God*, which Menotti withdrew after it opened at the Met in 1942, so upset by the production that he chose to direct most of his future premieres himself.) Over the next fifty years Menotti would write at least fifteen more operas. All are eminently listenable. None, however, was received or is remembered with any of the affection those initial seven generated. Some, such as *Labyrinth*, written for television in 1963, were exercises in self-indulgence and creative excess that dated themselves on the instant. Others, such as *La Loca*, created for Beverly Sills in 1979, or *Goya*, in 1986, were astonishing efforts of Puccini-esque mimicry and opera-writing craftsmanship signifying little or nothing.

Steven Mercurio worked closely with Menotti in his later years, conducting

*Bleecker Street* for Opera Company of Philadelphia. Mercurio's take on Menotti's current neglect is informed by an insider's knowledge so lacerating it almost renders all other speculation moot.

"Unfortunately, Menotti was not generous with his work," says Mercurio sadly. "He stifled opera companies. Essentially, if he wasn't involved, the production did not happen - either you had to pay him to come over and direct the piece himself or [he had] to give your director his benediction. It was just easier *not* to do the operas." Then there was the issue of Francis "Chip" Phelan, who entered Menotti's life in the 1960s. Phelan, who played the mute Toby in *The Medium* onstage and on television under Menotti's supervision, created the roles of Alexios in Menotti's play *The Leper* (1970) and Julian in Menotti's *The Egg* (1976), a "church opera." Menotti legally adopted Phelan as his son in 1974. "Now it's Chip everyone has to deal with," says Mercurio, "and, frankly, absolutely no one wants anything to do with Chip. As a result, this marvelous work languishes. It really is quite sad. Gian Carlo Menotti lived too long. His reputation would be much greater now if he had died at seventy-five."



Raymond Gibbs (Tony) and Judith Blegen (Emily) in the New York City Center production of *Help, Help, The Globolinks!*, 1969

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*Visitors* is by some accounts the most frequently performed opera in the world today. Written for television (another opera first) in 1951, it is a polished yet gentle fifty-minute exercise in heart-tugging, demi-religious storytelling about a crippled young shepherd boy who is healed in the presence of the Three Kings, then invited to join them as they pass in the night on their way to greet the Christ child in Bethlehem.

In considering *Amahl* and Menotti's other eloquent children's works, one is struck by the thought that he actually wrote all of his operas, in some odd sense, from a child's-eye view. *The Medium* and *The Consul* may be best appreciated by young boys with flashlights listening under the covers late at night. *The Telephone* could be any young girl's idea of absolute romantic hilarity, as *Amelia al Ballo* might be for a young teen (with a taste, perhaps, for slasher films). Is this the key to Menotti's communicative success with mass audiences, and the reason he is so exasperating to opera's intelligentsia? It is a cliché, but Menotti was perfectly comfortable with clichés: his operas appeal to the child in all of us. Then again, as Menotti clearly knew, all good operas do. □

Many of the operas that consumed Menotti during the waning period of his career were written about and/or for children - pieces such as *Martin's Lie*, a terse "church opera" predominantly sung by boy sopranos, composed in the 1960s on commission from CBS Television; or *Help, Help, the Globolinks!*, "a one-act opera for children and people who like children," as Menotti subtitled it in 1968. It is probably the last of his works to retain a performing life today.

A children's opera remains Menotti's greatest success: *Amahl and the Night*

BARRY SINGER *is the author of many books, including* Ever After: The Last Years of Musical Theater and Beyond *and the recently published* Alive at the Village Vanguard: My Life In and Out of Jazz Time *(with Lorraine Gordon).*

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