

The Sacred in Opera **April 2008**

In this Issue...
Ruth Dobson

For the next two editions of the SIO newsletter, we are taking an in-depth look at one-act Christmas operas which can be easily produced and are appropriate for both children and adults. This issue we will profile *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, *Only a Miracle*, *St. Nicholas*, *Good King Wenceslas*, and *The Shepherd's Play*. The next issue will highlight *The Christmas Rose*, *The Greenfield Christmas Tree*, *The Finding of the King*, *The Night of the Star*, and others.

Thanks to Allen Henderson for sharing his insight into a trilogy of operas by Richard Shephard, *Good King Wenceslas*, *The Shepherd's Play*, and *St. Nicholas*, with us in this issue.

As great as *Amahl and the Night Visitors* is, there are these and other works waiting to be discovered by all of us. We hope you will find these suggestions interesting. These operas vary in length from 10 minutes to an hour, and can be presented alone or paired with others. *Amahl and the Night Visitors* is almost always a successful box office draw. Pairing it with a lesser known work could make for a very enjoyable afternoon or evening presentation and give audiences an opportunity to enjoy other equally wonderful works. Several of these operas use children as cast members, while others call for only adult performers, but all have stories appropriate for children. They are written in a variety of styles and have very different production requirements.

Producers would need to take into consideration the ages of the children that are the target audience. *Only a Miracle* pairs nicely with *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, for example, as long as the characters of Herod and the Landlord are directed carefully and with humor. It's to Barab's credit as a composer and librettist that these two evil-doers eventually come off as pretty silly characters in the opera. Children really respond to the evil Landlord being made to speak like a donkey at the end of the opera.

I was involved in presenting a double bill of those two operas a few years ago at Portland State University and found that the children reacted equally well to both, following the stories easily.

Part of our mission is to encourage the presentation of sacred dramas in your own churches, synagogues, theaters, and universities. We also want to encourage the composition of more sacred drama as well as the presentation of the wealth of works already available to us.

Topics that will be covered in future issues include the staging of oratorio, with a look at Mendelssohn's *Elijah* and others, more Christmas operas, Easter operas, and an in-depth look at *The Eternal Road* by Kurt Weill (the sacred drama from which excerpts were performed at the Los Angeles convention). We want to hear from you. Please send your suggestions/information to me at dobsonr@pdx.edu.

Ruth Dobson
Chair, The Sacred in Opera

Sacred in Opera Spotlight

- Three Operas by Richard James Shephard -
Good King Wenceslas, St. Nicholas, and The Shepherd's Play

Information from *Sacred Music Drama: The Producer's Guide*, Second Edition, by Carl Gerbrandt, <http://www.AuthorHouse.com>



BIOGRAPHY

Richard James Shephard is a noted composer as well as vicar-choral, director of development, and chamberlain at one of the great cathedrals of the world, York Minster, in York, England. To celebrate the 150th anniversary of the founding of the University of the South, he composed the Sesquicentennial "Te Deum" that was performed first at their Founders' Day Convocation. Shephard earned B.A. and M.A. degrees at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, and in 2001 was awarded a Lambeth Doctorate by the Archbishop of Canterbury. Shephard's career in education includes service as director of music and deputy headmaster of the Cathedral School in Salisbury as well as nine years as headmaster of York Minster School. He is currently a visiting fellow in the Music Department at the University of York. Shephard's compositions include six operas, seven musicals, five oratorios, and dozens of other choral works. His music is performed regularly in churches, cathedrals, and concert halls around the world. Shephard has a long association with the University of the South, first visiting Sewanee with the York Minster Choir in 1996, then as a faculty member for the Sewanee Church Music Conference in 1997. He returned with the Minster Choir in 1998, and was a visiting Brown Foundation fellow in 1999. Shephard wrote music for the dedication of the Chapel of the Apostles at the School of Theology in 2000 and has written several choral works for the University Choir. The choir enjoyed Dr. Shephard's hospitality when it was in residence at York Minster in 2003 and May of 2007.

Sacred in Opera Spotlight

An Introduction by Allen Henderson

Having premiered, recorded, produced, directed, and/or performed roles in the three Christmas operas by Shephard and Schweizer a number of times and in various settings such as operatic stage, church sanctuary and parish hall, as well as in varying combinations with *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, Allen Henderson offers the following commentary on various aspects of these works.

Casting Considerations:

The roles are accessible and can be sung by undergraduate students or above average church choir members or professionals, allowing the works to be successful in a variety of settings. Producing a complete evening with *St. Nicholas*, *A Shepherd's Play*, and *Good King Wenceslas* tips the balance toward male roles with a boy soprano or treble voice required for the latter title. There are also six good female roles. None of the roles are too taxing. A male performer could conceivably perform a role in all three pieces if necessary. The two larger pieces have small choral sections. These are easily covered by as few forces as a double quartet (These could possibly be cast members from the other opera) but are equally successful with a church choir sitting on the first few rows of pews or a university choral ensemble in the pit or audience.

Staging Considerations:

The settings of these pieces allow them to be successfully performed in a church chancel area or on a full stage. We even performed *St. Nicholas* in a hotel meeting room at the 2007 NOA Convention on a 10'x10' platform! We produced *St. Nicholas* and *Amahl and the Night Visitors* on a double bill using the same unit set for Amahl's house and the three sisters' home. We simply redecorated during intermission and it worked amazingly well. *Good King Wenceslas* could work on this same set.

Programming Considerations:

Altering the order of the pieces will effect the impression with which the audience is left. For a light-hearted ending, perform *St. Nicholas* last. Ending the program with *Good King Wenceslas* provides a more poignant conclusion. Substituting *Amahl* for



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St. Nicholas produces a more serious program overall. I have performed each of these pieces separately as the centerpiece of Madrigal Feasts and holiday banquets as well.

Accompaniment Options:

The chamber ensemble orchestrations provide added color and support the singers well. The added expense of full orchestra is not necessary. I actually think the full version detracts from the intimate atmosphere that can be established between the performer and audience using the chamber ensemble versions.

Costuming Considerations:

Amahl costumes work very well for *Good King Wenceslas* characters. I prefer using a dark green costume for the character of St. Nicholas, distinguishing him clearly from Santa Claus. For two of the sisters in *St. Nicholas*, constructing their dresses with tear away elements such as sleeves attached with Velcro or a vested bodice that tears away is quite effective during the scene in which they quarrel and destroy their newly purchased clothing.

Recordings:

Complete recordings of these operas, cast requirements, program synopses, and instrumentation and scores are available at www.sjmp.com/catalog.operas.htm.

Sacred in Opera Spotlight

GOOD KING WENCESLAS

Music by Richard James Shephard (b. 1949)

Description:

Good King Wenceslas is a chancel opera in English with libretto by Mark Schweizer loosely based on and incorporating the well known hymn text by John Mason Neale (1818-1866). This carol is set to the 14th century tune “Tempus adest floridum,” found in *Piae Cantiones* (1582). A second carol incorporated into the opera is “Thus Angels Sung,” with text by George Wither (1588-1667) and set to “Song 34” by Orlando Gibbons (1583-1625). *Good King Wenceslas* premiered Christmas of 1997 at First United Methodist Church, Hopkinsville, KY according to librettist, Mark Schweizer. The St. James Press CD/DVD press release information of *Good King Wenceslas* states in the acknowledgment section “...Our thanks to Dr. Allen Henderson and the Austin Peay University Opera Workshop for their work in bringing these operas to life. The faculty and students in the voice, choral, and orchestral departments have been invaluable both in the premieres and the recordings of these new works.”

One Act:

The setting is the castle and surrounding grounds of Good King Wenceslas, 922-929 AD.

Duration: 30 minutes

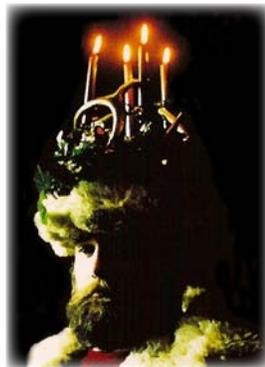
Musical and Dramatic Characteristics:

Tonal; conventional harmonies; melodic material is both original as well as derived from existing carols and hymns.

Characters:

- Stephen, the page, treble
- Mother, soprano
- Chancellor, tenor
- Good King Wenceslas, bass
- Angel, soprano
- Shepherd Girl, soprano
- Kaspar, tenor
- Balthazar, baritone
- Melchior, baritone

(Mother/Angel and Chancellor/Kaspar may be sung by the same persons.)



Chorus:

SATB—Parts need not be memorized and should be performed as a Greek chorus, outside of the action.

ATTENTION READERS!

We are interested in hearing from ALL of you about sacred music dramas that you are doing, those you have already done, and those that you have seen performed! Please e-mail submissions to Ruth Dobson at dobsonr@pdx.edu.

Orchestration:

Several instrumental adaptations are available: full orchestra, chamber ensemble, or piano alone. The opera was originally composed for a small instrumental chamber ensemble of oboe, horn, bassoon, piano, and percussion (the vibraphone part may be played on an electronic keyboard).

Synopsis:

The story centers around a rude and spoiled young page, Stephen, who is celebrating his birthday. Good King Wenceslas summons Stephen and informs him that together, they will be embarking on a journey to bring food, drink, and fuel to a poor peasant. Stephen grumbles and complains incessantly as he makes the journey with the King. The weather turns bad, and they soon lose their way in the storm. They find shelter, and as Stephen watches over the sleeping King, an angel disguised as an old woman appears to Stephen and tells him a story. A mystery play unfolds which reveals a story about selfless giving to the Christ child. Stephen's selfish heart is changed and he completes the journey in great joy with Good King Wenceslas offering “charity toward the upright.”

Materials:

St. James Music Press—piano/vocal score and orchestra parts are available for purchase.

Notes:

May be performed in either a house of worship or theatre, with or without sets, and is musically accessible for professional and amateur singers alike.

Sacred in Opera Spotlight

Music by Richard James Shephard (b. 1949)

THE THREE SHEPHERDS

Description:

A pastorella with libretto by Mark Schweizer in English, based on the biblical story of the Angel's announcement of Christ's birth to the shepherds. The Latin text, "Gloria in excelsis Deo," is sung by the Angels (chorus). This work is often performed between *Good King Wenceslas* and *St. Nicholas* to create a trilogy. The opera premiered in 2000 by Austin Peay University, Clarksville, Tennessee.

One Act:

A pastorella with continuous action. Setting is outdoors at the time of the birth of Jesus.

Duration: 10 minutes

Characters:

Shepherd 1, tenor
Shepherd 2, tenor or high baritone
Shepherd 3, baritone
Shepherd 4, tenor or baritone

Chorus:

SATB with a short soprano solo section—parts need not be memorized and should be performed as a Greek chorus, outside the action.

Orchestration: Flute, windchimes, and string quartet or piano

Plot Synopsis:

Three shepherds hear the angels proclaiming the birth of Christ and immediately leave their sheep to take their gifts to the Savior of the world. The fourth shepherd finds the sheep unguarded and scolds the three shepherds for their carelessness. The three shepherds exclaim their awe and amazement at hearing the angel's song and try to recreate the joyous sound. The angel chorus bursts in and beckons the fourth shepherd to come to see the wondrous sight. The three shepherds chime in and encourage the fourth shepherd to give the best gift of all, his heart.

Materials: St. James Music Press—instrumental parts and vocal score available for purchase.

Notes:

Works well in a house of worship though a theatre may be used, especially if all three works are being performed. May be performed with or without sets.

ST. NICHOLAS

Description:

A comic Christmas opera with libretto in English by Mark Schweizer, loosely based on the legend of *Tres Fillae* (three sisters), one of the oldest and most cherished legends of St. Nicholas. The opera also includes three well known carols: "Past Three O'Clock," a traditional London carol, "Poverty," an old Welsh carol, and "Still, Still, Still" of Austrian Origin. *St. Nicholas* premiered in 1998 performance by Austin Peay State University, Clarksville, Tennessee.

**One Act:**

Setting is in the home of the three sisters, Sophis, Juliet, and Lucy: 1000-1100 AD.

Duration: 35 minutes

Musical and Dramatic Characteristics:

Tonal, conventional harmonies, melodic material is both original as well as derived from existing carols and hymns.

Characters:

Sophie, soprano
Juliet, soprano
Lucy, mezzo-soprano
St. Nicholas, baritone
Traveler, tenor
Traveler's Wife (mute)
Sir William, tenor

(The Traveler and Sir William may be sung by the same person.)

Chorus:

SATB—parts need not be memorized and should be performed as a Greek chorus, outside of the action. A children's chorus is optional.

Orchestration:

Several instrumental adaptations are available: full orchestra, chamber ensemble, or piano alone. The opera was originally composed for a small instrumental chamber ensemble: clarinet, timpani, percussion (wood block, triangle), cello or electric keyboard, piano, 4 trumpets (optional), 2 violins, and cello.

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St. Nicholas

Continued from Page 5

Plot Synopsis:

Three sisters, Juliet, Lucy, and Sophie, are cleaning the house in preparation for Christmas. They are poor, having lost their father, but in the spirit of the season make wishes. All three wish for husbands. They go to bed. St. Nicholas arrives and leaves three gold coins for them. Juliet awakens first and selfishly takes all of the coins to buy a dress for herself. St. Nicholas then leaves two more coins which Lucy takes in hopes of attracting a husband. At last, St. Nicholas leaves one coin for Sophie over which she rejoices in the knowledge that the money will keep herself and her sisters from going hungry.

There is a knock on the door. A man and his wife who are about to deliver a baby appear. They ask for food and shelter. Sophie tells them she has nothing to offer except one gold coin. They thank her and leave for the warmth of a nearby inn. The two sisters return from their shopping spree, discovering that Sophie also received a gold coin. Their jealousy turns to rage and they tear each other's new clothes. St. Nicholas, observing them, chastises the two girls for their greed. A knock at the door reveals Sir William, Sophie's long lost love. He has been searching for Sophie, having encountered a young couple with a new baby who told him that a young girl provided for their needs. Suspecting Sophie as the young girl, Sir William, having now found his Sophie, pledges to marry her. St. Nicholas entreats all to remember the true meaning of Christmas.

Materials:

St. James Music Press — piano/vocal scores as well as full orchestra and chamber orchestra parts are available for purchase.

Notes:

May be performed in either a house of worship or theatre, with or without sets. Easily accessible; enjoyable entertainment; light comedy.

Only A Miracle

Music by Seymour Barab (b. 1921)

Information from *Sacred Music Drama: The Producer's Guide*, Second Edition, by Carl Gerbrandt, <http://www.AuthorHouse.com>



The Birth is often called the Greatest Story Ever Told. It is also the Story Most Often Told—told in plays, novels, movies, etc., which certainly must number in the hundreds. One would be sure, as I was, that no aspect of the Story could possibly have been left Untold after more than two millenia.

Then inspiration struck. Perhaps my imagination could conjure up a plot concerning the Innkeeper (not described in the Story) who banished Mary and Joseph to the Stable in which the Birth took place.

I would like to think the honor of being the first to tell such a story has fallen to me. But I am probably wrong.

-Seymour Barab-

Description:

A Christmas opera with libretto in English by the composer. *Only a Miraculæ* is an account of events immediately following Christ's birth. Premiered by the Illinois University Opera Theater, Urbana, on December 1, 1983. Additional performances have been made by Portland State University.

One Act:

The setting is outside the Inn at Bethlehem some days after the Holy Birth

Duration: 50 minutes

Musical and Dramatic Characteristics:

Tonal but dissonant at times with considerable chromaticism. Rhythmic complexities within recitative sections which flow quite naturally with the contour of the English. Melodic within safe vocal ranges. Serious drama with occasional humor. Considerable recitative with arias and some set numbers. *Continued on Page 7*

Only A Miracle

Continued from Page 6

Characters:

Sylphinia, Soprano

Soldier, Tenor

Landlord, Baritone

Messenger & King Herod, Bass.

(These two roles may be sung by the same person.)

Chorus: None

Orchestration:

Flute, Oboe, 2 Clarinets, Bassoon, 2 Horns, Trumpet, Trombone, Timpani, Percussion, Strings. The piece may also be performed with piano.

Plot Synopsis:

A Messenger is looking for Joseph. He goes by an Inn where a kind-hearted servant girl, Sylphinia, and a brutal Landlord are discussing the absence of his food. The Landlord recalls turning away a couple, Mary and Joseph, who were about to give birth to a child. Sylphinia secretly recalls that she took them to the stable behind the Inn.

A soldier and King Herod enter. Herod is furious that the Wisemen left without telling him the location of the Christ child. Herod makes plans to offer a reward in exchange for the child. The soldier is appointed to carry out this mission. The soldier meets Sylphinia who tells him of the miracles that she has seen in connection with the birth of the child. He pleads with Sylphinia to reveal the child's location but to no avail. The Landlord then demands to know where the child is. He starts to beat Sylphinia as the soldier attempts to protect her, but the Landlord prevails.

He ties up the Soldier and threatens him with death if he does not reveal the location of the reward. The Landlord is about to kill the Soldier when the Messenger reappears saying that it is too late: the child is safe having escaped to Egypt. The Messenger then reveals that he is an angel. He frees the Soldier and Sylphinia, and causes the Landlord to speak like a donkey.

The opera ends with a rousing ensemble given as a gift to the audience in celebration of Christmas.

Materials: G. Schirmer–Tape available

Notes:

Very adaptable for either church or theatre performance.

Composer's Biography

Seymour Barab was born in Chicago, Illinois in 1921, and began his professional career as a church organist at the age of thirteen. Mr. Barab's interest in contemporary music led to a close association with American composers, whose music he began to perform while he was still in high school. Before leaving Chicago, he became a founder of the New Music Quartet; and then in New York City of the Composer's Quartet, the resident quartet of Columbia University, whose primary purpose was to promote contemporary music. On the other end of the spectrum, he played the viola da gamba and helped form the New York Pro Musica, one of the first contemporary ensembles to reintroduce Baroque and Renaissance music.

"THE ROSSINI OF OUR TIME!"

-Miriam Gideon-

He has been a member of the faculties of Rutgers University, Black Mountain College, and the New England Conservatory of Music.

Barab's proclivity for musical theater has ensured consistent performance of his operas, especially his comic one-acts and those for young audiences. According to Central Opera Service, during the '88-'89 season, he was the most performed composer of opera in America. His fellow composer, Miriam Gideon, has called him "the Rossini of our time."

His *Little Red Riding Hood* was the first American opera performed in China in its post-isolationist period. His highly praised full-length Civil War opera *Philip Marshall*, which uses Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* as its point of departure, was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. *The Toy Shop*, commissioned by the New York City Opera, was performed at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., and in 1998, scenes from *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* were also performed there, where he was presented with a Lifetime Achievement Award by the National Opera Association.

Seymour's *Cosmos Cantata*, was set to a text by the novelist Kurt Vonnegut and commissioned and performed by the Manhattan Chamber Orchestra under the direction of Richard Aldon Clark.

Of their collaboration, Kurt Vonnegut said, "Barab's music is full of magic. He proved to an atheist that God exists. What an honor to have worked with him."

Amahl and the Night Visitors

Music by Gian-Carlo Menotti (b. 1911)

Information from *Sacred Music Drama: The Producer's Guide*, Second Edition, by Carl Gerbrandt, <http://www.AuthorHouse.com>

Description:

A Christmas miracle opera with libretto in English by the composer inspired by “The Adoration of the Magi,” a painting by Hieronymous Bosch. *Amahl* premiered on NBC-TV, December 24, 1951. Commissioned by NBC-TV Opera Theatre. Stage premiere on February 21, 1952, by Indiana University.

One Act.

Setting:

The interior of a peasant's hut near Bethlehem and the fields outside during the time of the birth of Jesus.

Duration: 50 minutes

Musical and Dramatic Characteristics:

Vocal line declamatory with many accompanied recitative-like passages. Arias, ensembles. Highly melodic.

Characters:

Amahl, boy soprano
His Mother, mezzo-soprano
King Kaspar, tenor, requires excellent acting
King Melchior, baritone
King Balthazar, bass
Page, baritone

Chorus:

SATB—Shepherds involved in the action

Dance:

Three or more dancers who dance for the Kings—folk dancing typical of the culture.

Orchestration:

2 flutes, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, horn, trumpet, harp, piano, percussion, and strings. A two-piano arrangement also available.

Materials:

G. Schirmer—A staging guide is also available for rent.

Notes:

Equally adaptable to church or theatre performance.



Plot Synopsis:

The crippled shepherd boy, Amahl, tells his mother of a “gigantic” star gleaming in the night sky. She chides him for his lucid imagination and perpetual lying. After Amahl is finally in bed, three Oriental Kings knock at the door asking for a place to rest. Amahl and his mother invite them in, but as they have nothing to offer them, the Mother invites all the neighbors who bring food and gifts for the Kings. A dance and celebration follow. The neighbors leave and all settle down for a night's rest. While all are sleeping, Amahl's mother awakens and is captivated by the thought of how much she could do for her crippled son if only she had a little of the gold which the Kings brought with them to present to the newborn Christ Child. She attempts to steal the gold but is caught by the Page, and a struggle follows. Amahl and the Kings are awakened. The Kings in their kindness tell her to keep the gold for the Child they are seeking doesn't need it. Feeling guilty, Amahl's mother gives it back out of love for the newborn King they seek. Moved with compassion, Amahl too wants to offer a gift and holds out his dearest possession, his crutch. As he presents it to the Kings to take with them, he is miraculously healed. Rejoicing, he follows along with the Kings to personally present his gift to the Christ Child.



Composer's Biography

Gian Carlo Menotti was born on 7 July 1911, in Cadegliano, Italy and died in 2007. 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 and continues to receive hundreds of performances annually.

At the age of 7, under the guidance of his mother, Menotti began to compose songs, and four years later he wrote the words and music of his first opera, *The Death of Pierrot*. In 1923 he began his formal musical training at the Verdi Conservatory in Milan. Following the death of his father, his mother took him to the United States where he was enrolled at Philadelphia's Curtis Institute of Music.

His 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*, the first such commission ever given. His first ballet, *Sebastian*, followed in 1944, and for this he wrote the libretto 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*, both enjoying international success. In 1954, *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. Menotti wrote the text to all of 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 set to Italian words.



1958 saw the opening of Menotti's own festival, the "Festival of Two Worlds," in Spoleto, Italy. Devoted to the cultural collaboration of Europe and America in a program embracing all of the arts, the Spoleto Festival has continued to become one of the most popular festivals in Europe. The festival literally became "of two worlds" in 1977 with the founding of Spoleto USA in Charleston, South Carolina, which he led until 1993 when he became Director of the Rome Opera.

Well into his 90s he continued to direct opera at Spoleto and elsewhere. His 1996 Spoleto production of *Amahl* was filmed for commercial release. In 1984 Menotti was awarded the Kennedy Center Honor for lifetime achievement in the arts. He was chosen to be the 1991 "Musician of the Year" by Musical America, inaugurating worldwide tributes to the composer in honor of his 80th birthday.

The Sacred in Opera

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