



AM AHL AND THE NIGHT VISITORS

STUDY GUIDE PREPARED BY NASHVILLE OPERA

AM AHL STORY

THE COUNTRYSIDE NEAR BETHLEHEM

The opera begins with Amahl playing his pipe outside as his mother calls for him to come home. We find that Amahl is a disabled boy who can walk only with a crutch. He is known for telling tall tales which frequently frustrate his mother. Amahl tries to tell his mother about what he has just seen in the night sky—a large star with a long tail. His mother, however, is fed up with Amahl's vivid imagination and scolds the boy. Later that night, Amahl's mother weeps, praying that Amahl not become a beggar. After bedtime, there is a knock at the door and Amahl finds three kings standing at their threshold. He tries to tell his mother the news, but she refuses to believe him until she sees the visitors for herself. The Three Kings enter and tell Amahl and his mother they have been following the night sky and traveling under a great star in search of a wondrous Child. They are on their way to find a newborn king and ask to stop and take rest.

While Amahl's mother gathers wood for a fire, Amahl begins to ask the kings many questions. One king, Kaspar, shows Amahl the box he carries which is full of magic stones, beads, and candy. Amahl explains that he was once

a shepherd but his mother had to sell his sheep for money and food. Amahl's mother soon returns and asks the boy to gather their neighbors hoping that with their help, the kings may be fed and entertained properly. The neighbors oblige, bringing gifts, special food, and present a dance.

After the crowd has left and the kings are asleep, Amahl's mother is tempted to steal for her son some for the kings' gold that was meant for the Christ Child. The Page catches her and threatens to beat her. Amahl wakes to find the Page grabbing at his mother and he tries desperately to defend her. To great surprise, the Three Kings show kindness and compassion and offer to let her keep the gold as the Holy Child will not need earthly power or wealth to build his kingdom. The mother says she has waited all her life for such a king and asks the Three Kings to take back the gold. She wishes to send a gift but has nothing to give. Amahl offers his most prized possession—his crutch—as a gift for the kings to bring the infant. As he moves forward with the crutch, he realizes that his leg has miraculously healed. With great joy, Amahl joins the kings in their quest under the brilliant star of Bethlehem in search of the newborn king.



THE MUSIC OF AMAHL

AM AHL

Amahl is a young, energetic boy whose theme is illustrated by two distinct musical passages. The first is a colorful tune illustrating the sound of the boy's pipe which is heard during the opening scene of the opera. The second uses short, staccato rhythms which reflect Amahl's limp. It is often heard when Amahl is telling his mother a story or looking outside the doorway.

AM AHL'S MOTHER

Mother has a direct and no-nonsense personality. Her music is distinctly different from Amahl's cheerful and light theme. It is abrupt, changing the musical texture from Amahl's rambunctious character to one that is sharp or harsh.

"All that gold"

This heartfelt aria, or solo song, is sung by the mother as she struggles to sit in the presence of the riches intended for an unknown boy the three kings search for. She is tempted to take some of the valuables while they sleep in order to better care for her family.

THE THREE KINGS

The Three Kings—Kaspar, Melchior, and Balthazar—have completely different music from the rest of the characters.

Listen for the male voices (bass, baritone, and tenor) as they sing their first entrance. The harmonies are thick and the orchestration is similar to that of Amahl's mother—full, rich, and very present.

"From Far Away We Come"

The three kings make their way to the home of Amahl and his mother, seeking a safe place to rest. They sing in harmony, repeating a simple rhythmic pattern while the melody represents the power and mystery of their presence.

"Have You Seen a Child"

After each individual character has been introduced and their music presented, the characters join together in this ensemble. The kings explain their mission and ask Amahl's mother if she has seen the child in which they search. Listen for this haunting, melancholy melody sung in a minor key.

"This is My Box"

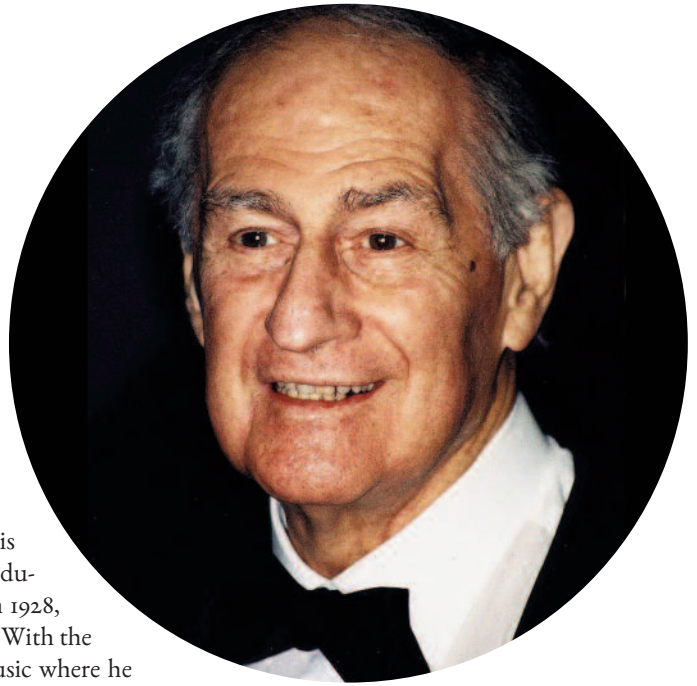
Kaspar, the oldest king who is mostly deaf, sings this humorous piece to Amahl. Kaspar shows the contents of the box singing short phrases and repeated snippets of the melody. This piece is a wonderful showcase of the highest of male voices, the tenor.



AM AHL'S COMPOSER

GIAN CARLO MENOTTI | 1911-2007

"Any subject is good for opera if the composer feels it so intently he must sing it out!"



Gian Carlo Menotti is often considered an American composer though he was born in Cadigliano, Italy. At a young age, he began to compose songs under the guidance and support of his mother. He was 11 when he wrote his first opera, *The Death of Pierrot*. In 1923, Menotti began his formal music education at The Verdi Conservatory in Milan. After the death of his father in 1928, Menotti and his mother moved to America where they lived in Philadelphia. With the advice of Arturo Toscanini, Menotti enrolled at The Curtis Institute of Music where he studied under Rosario Scalero. During his studies at Curtis, Menotti met fellow composer Samuel Barber, who would later become one of Menotti's closest friends and collaborators.

His first produced opera, *Amelia Goes to the Ball*, was initially staged at Curtis, then later at the Metropolitan Opera. This brought attention to Menotti's work and writing skills, especially to Samuel Chotzinoff, general music director of the National Broadcasting Company. Chotzinoff commissioned Menotti to write an opera for the radio. In 1939, *The Old Maid and the Thief* was broadcast on the radio and later produced for stage in 1941.

After these early successes, Menotti continued to write for the stage. However, his most influential and prominent opera premiered on Christmas Eve 1951 and televised live by NBC. *Amahl and the Night Visitors* was the first opera to be performed live on television and has now become a classic opera and a staple during the holiday season.

Over the course of his career, Menotti collaborated with a multitude of other composers and librettists creating works that are frequently performed today. Menotti was known for writing both the lyrics and the music for his operas, acting both as composer and librettist. Over the course of his life, Menotti wrote 22 operas and a variety of chamber music. In 1984, Gian Carlo Menotti was awarded a Kennedy Center Honor for his impact in the world of opera. He passed away in Monte Carlo, Monaco, on February 1, 2007, at the age of 97 and is buried in East Lothian, Scotland.

CELEBRATED WORKS AND AWARDS

Amelia Goes to the Ball, 1937

The Old Maid and the Thief, 1939

The Medium, 1946

The Telephone, 1947

The Consul, 1950, **winner of a Pulitzer Prize**

Amahl and the Night Visitors, 1951, **first opera for television**

The Saint of Bleeker Street, 1954, **winner of a Pulitzer Prize**

Labyrinth, 1963, **an opera for television**

The Last Savage, 1963

La Loca, 1979

Goya, 1986

The Singing Child, 1993

AMABL'S CULTURAL INFLUENCE

- *Amahl and the Night Visitors* is unique in that it was the first opera ever written for television!
- When NBC approached Menotti to write a television opera, he was hesitant. Fortunately, a visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art helped change his mind. There he caught a glimpse of Hieronymus Bosch's painting *The Adoration of the Magi*, which depicts the Three Kings, and became inspired to write a one-act Christmas opera, *Amahl and the Night Visitors*.
- Menotti was so enthusiastic about completing this opera that he worked with great speed and began conducting rehearsals before the work was finished. Knowing that he needed to please a broad audience (and one likely new to opera) he composed the voice parts to be pleasing to the average ear. To his credit he was able to achieve this without making the music too simplistic. He also wisely included comedic relief in the characters of the Three Kings.
- NBC Television Opera Theatre premiered *Amahl and the Night Visitors* on Christmas Eve 1951 as more than five million viewers tuned in!

Kurt Yaghjian as Amahl,
1965



A SOUND ANATOMY OF OPERA

There are many different kinds of songs in opera. Performers may sing alone, in couples (duets), trios, or larger groups, and there are also moments when no one sings at all—and each composer develops his or her own preferred combinations of these options.

THE OVERTURE

An opera usually begins with an orchestral piece of music called the overture, which functions as an introduction to the opera. Lasting anywhere from five to twenty-five minutes, these opera overtures usually contain important themes from the rest of the production. Before 1800, house lights were not dimmed while the overture played, and audience members continued to talk, drink, and even play cards! This ceased in the 1900's as the overture became a more integral part of an operatic performance. At the end of the overture, the curtain rises and the story of the opera unfolds through a series of scenes. These scenes are organized into acts.

ARIAS

An aria is a solo moment for an opera singer and is usually accompanied by the orchestra. Italian for “air” or song, an aria stops the plot momentarily, giving each character the opportunity to express their innermost thoughts and feelings. These pieces also provide an opportunity for the singer to demonstrate their vocal and artistic skill. Mozart, Verdi and Puccini were able to achieve a remarkable balance between memorable melodies that perfectly suit the human voice while still reflecting the drama of the text.

RECITATIVES

Recitatives, a type of singing unique to opera, help propel the action forward. They can be accompanied either by a full orchestra, or, as is often the case with opera written before 1800, by harpsichord or keyboard instrument. Often introducing an aria, the text is delivered quickly and encompasses a very limited melodic range. It has no recognizable melody and the rhythms follow those of the spoken word.

ENSEMBLE (“TOGETHER”)

Ensemble singing deals with two or more voices of different range performing together. These include duets, trios, quartets, quintets, and sometimes sextets. The composer blends the voices depending on the dramatic requirements of the plot. For instance, a love duet may begin with each performer singing different music at different times, then gradually unifying into harmony. Conversely, the music of a duet may depict conflict. Georges Bizet used this technique in *Carmen*: if you listen to the duets sung by Carmen and Don José, you might notice that their musical lines are never completely blended, and this foreshadows their tragic ends.

CHORUS

Most operas include music sung by a large group of singers (sometimes more than 40) called a chorus. The chorus often appears in a crowd scene and can provide a stunning contrast to solo or ensemble singing. In one opera by Benjamin Britten, the chorus is played by a single male and a single female, as in the tradition of ancient Greek theatre.

ORCHESTRAL MUSIC

The orchestra accompanies the singing and introduces the opera with the overture. Musical and emotional themes often appear in orchestral introductions and conclusions to arias, recitatives, and choruses. In many cases, the orchestra plays such an important role, the gravity of its existence is that of a leading character.

ON OPERATIC VOICES

Every voice is unique and no singer gets to choose the category in which they sing but must work with the vocal attributes with which they were born. Composers usually assign a voice type to a character based on his/her personality or age. Read these descriptions for examples.

WOMEN

SOPRANO

This is the highest female voice and has a range similar to a violin. In opera, the soprano most often plays the young girl or the heroine (sometimes called the prima donna), since a high bright voice traditionally suggests femininity, virtue, and innocence. The normal range of a soprano is from middle C through two octaves above middle C, sometimes with extra top notes. Most women are sopranos. In *Amahl*, the role of Amahl is sung by a boy soprano or treble). Camila is the soprano role in *Pepito*.

MEZZO-SOPRANO

Also called a mezzo, this is the middle female voice with a range similar to an oboe. A mezzo's sound is often darker and warmer than a soprano's. In opera, composers generally use a mezzo to portray older women, villainesses, seductive heroines, and sometimes even young boys. Mezzo-sopranos also often serve as the friend or sidekick to the soprano. The mezzo-soprano's normal range is from the A below middle C to the A two octaves above it. In *Amahl*, the role of the Mother is sung by a mezzo-soprano. In *Pepito*, the role of Angie is a mezzo.

CONTRALTO

This is the lowest female voice and has a voice similar in range to a clarinet. Contraltos usually sing the roles of older females or special character parts such as witches and old gypsies. The range is two octaves from F below middle C to the top line of the treble clef. A true contralto is very rare—some believe they don't exist at all! There is no featured contralto in *Amahl* or *Pepito*.

MEN

COUNTER-TENOR

This is the highest male voice, which was mainly used in very early opera and oratorio. The voice of a countertenor sounds very much like a mezzo-soprano's voice and they often sing the same repertoire. Like the contralto, true countertenors are very rare. There are no counter-tenors in *Amahl* or *Pepito*.

TENOR

This is usually the highest male voice in an opera. It is similar to a trumpet in range, tone, color, and acoustical ring. The tenor typically plays the hero or the love interest. His voice ranges from the C below middle C to the above. In *Amahl*, the role of King Kaspar is sung by a tenor, and in *Pepito*, David.

BARITONE

This is the middle male voice and is close to a French horn in range and tone color. The baritone usually plays villainous roles or father-figures. In *Amahl*, the role of King Melchior is sung by a baritone. In *Pepito*, there is no baritone. The range is from the G an octave and a half below middle C to the G above.

BASS-BARITONE/BASS

This is the lowest male voice and is similar to a trombone or bassoon in range and color. Low voices usually suggest age and wisdom in serious opera. In *Amahl*, the role of King Balthazar is sung by a bass-baritone. The title role of *Pepito* is a bass-baritone. The range spans from roughly the F above middle C to the F an octave and a fourth below.

OPERA ETIQUETTE

ALWAYS BE EARLY!

Please arrive early to ensure you are able to find your seat before the performance begins and before the orchestra tunes. If you are late, you may miss the overture or even the first act!

OPERA IS FOR ALL AGES TO ENJOY!

Opera is full of emotion, passion, human conflict, and discovery. Nashville Opera usually presents operas in their original language and projects supertitles above the stage so the audience can understand every word.

WHAT TO WEAR

Many people think of a night at the opera as a glamorous event and an excuse to bring out the fancy attire. But, it is also acceptable to dress comfortably. For dress rehearsals, the casual attire that students wear to school is perfectly acceptable. A light sweater, jacket, or wrap is suggested because the theater is air-conditioned.



USE THE RESTROOM

Once in the theater it is courteous to remain seated and involved in the production until intermission. Please do not leave the theater unless there is an emergency.

PLEASE BE COURTEOUS...

to everyone in the audience and on stage. Opera is a live performance, so any talking, cell-phone use (including texting) or other noise/light disruption takes away from everyone's experience at the opera. Remember that unlike many staged performances, opera singers do not use microphones. This makes it essential to wait until intermission to unwrap gum/candy, talk to your neighbor or use electronic devices that may distract others. Be sure to turn off cell phone and pagers.

APPLAUSE WELCOME!

There are several times during a performance when it is appropriate to applaud the performers. The first opportunity to applaud takes place when the conductor takes the podium at the very beginning of the performance and when he/she returns to the podium following intermission(s). It is also acceptable to applaud after an overture or aria in the middle of a performance. Applaud when the performance moves you. You may show your appreciation to the performers by shouting "Bravo!" for a male performer, "Brava!" for a female performer, or "Bravi!" for an ensemble. At the conclusion of the performance, singers who performed principal roles in the opera will take their "curtain call." It is appropriate to continue applauding until all singers have stepped forward to accept their applause. Sometimes, audience members are so impressed with the overall performance of the opera, they will stand and applaud the entire ensemble. This is called a "standing ovation."

NO PHOTOS OR RECORDINGS PERMITTED