



## Menotti, Gian Carlo (1911-2007)

by John Louis DiGaetani

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One of the leading classical composers of the twentieth century, Gian Carlo Menotti not only had a distinguished career, but also achieved acclaim at a time when his uncloseted homosexuality could have been a major barrier. Amazingly prolific and indefatigable, even in his nineties he continued to be a vital presence in the world of classical music.

Menotti was born in Cadegliano, Italy on July 7, 1911. Although his family was not especially musical, they recognized their son's prodigious talent. Under the guidance of his mother, Menotti began to compose as a child. He wrote his first opera at the age of 11.

He began his formal study of music at the Verdi Conservatory in Milan in 1923, but after the death of his father, he and his mother traveled to the United States, where he entered the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia.

Menotti quickly adjusted to American culture and soon mastered the English language. Although he retained his Italian citizenship and eventually acquired residences in Italy and Scotland, he spent most of his professional career in the United States and wrote most of the libretti to his operas in English.

Among his fellow students at Curtis were composers Leonard Bernstein and Samuel Barber. Barber (1910-1981), with whom he was to share a relationship that endured more than thirty years, soon became his life-partner, though Menotti later also had a long personal and professional relationship with the conductor Thomas Schippers. Menotti wrote the libretto for Barber's most famous opera, *Vanessa* (1964).

Avoiding the atonalism of the avant-garde school of Schoenberg and Webern, Menotti cast his lot with the popular tonal style of Schubert and Puccini, though he sometime used atonalism for dramatic effect in his operas.

Menotti's first mature work, the one-act opera buffa, *Amelia Goes to the Ball* (1936), had its premiere in Philadelphia. It was subsequently staged at the Metropolitan Opera in New York where it received popular and critical acclaim.

Menotti then wrote a series of operas that were staged very successfully on Broadway. *The Medium* (1945), *The Telephone* (1946), *The Consul* (1949), and *The Saint of Bleecker Street* (1954) established his reputation as the most popular opera composer in America. He received New York Drama Critics Circle awards and Pulitzer Prizes for *The Consul* and *The Saint of Bleecker Street*.

Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors* was originally written for television and broadcast in 1951. It has since become a Christmas classic, performed all over the world during the Christmas season.

Most of Menotti's major successes as an opera composer came in the 1940s and 1950s. Afterwards he had a



Gian Carlo Menotti in 1944.  
Photograph by Carl van Vechten, December 10, 1944.  
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string of operatic failures and modest successes, including such works as *Maria Golovin* (1958), *The Last Savage* (1963), *La Loca* (1979), *Goya* (1986), and *The Singing Child* (1993). Some of these compositions will undoubtedly be restaged and reevaluated in the future.

In addition to opera, Menotti also composed orchestral and chamber works in various genres, including several solo concertos (his Piano Concerto is occasionally heard) and three tuneful ballets, of which *Sebastian* (1944) has enjoyed an extended life as a ballet suite.

One of Menotti's greatest triumphs was The Festival of Two Worlds, which he established in Spoleto, Italy in 1958. The festival, which is devoted to celebrating and encouraging the cultural collaboration of Europe and America, became one of the most successful ventures of its kind.

In 1977, the Festival literally became "of two worlds" when Menotti founded Spoleto USA in Charleston, South Carolina. He led the Charleston festival until 1993, when he withdrew to become Director of the Rome Opera.

The composer continued to direct opera at Spoleto and elsewhere in his eighties and even nineties.

Menotti was sometimes charged with extending himself too broadly and spreading himself too thin as he pursued a notably versatile career--composer of opera, orchestral composer, composer of songs, director of opera, director of the Spoleto Festival, etc. Still, he achieved real distinction in many areas.

As a force opposed to the power of the atonalism of the Vienna School, he was an important figure in the music of his time. His compositions were written in the traditional tonal system and strive for melodic and harmonic distinction. Moreover, his music is comfortable for singers to sing and for audiences to hear.

Before gay liberation and before gay people could be completely candid about their liaisons, Menotti and Barber proved that gay men could have relationships that did not have to be closeted, though the term "homosexuality" was never mentioned in public.

During the period of McCarthyism and its homophobic persecution of queers in America, Menotti made a significant contribution to the cause of human liberation through his vivid example as an accomplished artist who was also an uncloseted homosexual.

In the 1970s, Menotti began to live in Scotland. He continued to reside there with an adopted son and his family until his death on February 1, 2007.

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