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***Verismo* in the works of Gian Carlo Menotti: A comparison with  
late nineteenth century Italian opera**

Chacon, Victor, D.M.A.

University of Washington, 1991

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**VERISMO IN THE WORKS OF GIAN CARLO MENOTTI:  
A COMPARISON WITH LATE NINETEENTH-CENTURY ITALIAN OPERA**

by

Victor Chacon

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Musical Arts

University of Washington

1991

Approved by

Ralph K. Kozin  
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Program Authorized  
to Offer Degree

School of Music

Date

June 1, 1991

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**Doctoral Dissertation**

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Abstract

VERISMO IN THE WORKS OF GIAN CARLO MENOTTI:  
A COMPARISON WITH LATE NINETEENTH-CENTURY ITALIAN OPERA

By Victor Chacon

Chairperson of Supervisory Committee: Professor Ralph Rosinbum, School of Music

The Medium, The Consul, and The Saint of Bleecker Street by Menotti attest to a continuation of the *verismo* strain observed in certain late-nineteenth-century operas, especially Cavalleria Rusticana and Paolucci. The study parallels *veristic* elements in Menotti with these corresponding works by examining their musical and dramatic relatedness. It considers the theatrical aesthetic of the day in Italy and the reaction of *verismo* to the style of Verdian opera. It posits that late-nineteenth-century musical trends shaped *verismo* and poses five reasons for the emergence of *verismo* in Italy. The decline of the Italian economy ca. 1871, its effect on regions of the country, and its link with the general inactivity of opera productions up through the late 1880's are considered.

*Verismo* is defined and its link with French literary naturalism is established. It is shown that *verismo* became the Italian counterpart of the French literary movement, Giovanni Verga as its Italian exponent.

In twentieth-century operatic acting, the principles of Stanislavski and Felsenstein form the basis of a realist movement in opera. Felsenstein's exploration of the operatic medium "used music to create drama." The study shows that Menotti's realist style itself had links with Felsenstein's principles.

The Medium (1946) is analyzed, including the work's symbolism, its slice-of-life quality, its believability, and its Romantic aspects, particularly the grotesque. The

analysis embraces the work's musical style, its vocal writing, leitmotifs, and the appearance of arias and aria-like structures.

The paper addresses *neo-verismo* specifically and proposes reasons for its decline. Changes in the critical view of opera in the 1950's and the bases upon which critics and scholar formed their assessments of Menotti's style are considered. The writer finally identifies three factors (realism, sensationalism, and contemporaneity) and offers them as an endorsement of *neo-verismo*. The writer argues for a reappraisal of the artistic strength of Menotti's three operas based on these universal factors.

## Table of Contents

	<i>Page</i>
Introduction .....	1
Preface .....	7
Chapter One:	
Verismo as a Reaction to the Style of Verdian Opera .....	9
The Influence of French Opera in Italy .....	17
Wagner's Influence on Italian Opera .....	21
Chapter Two:	
Verismo: A Definition .....	31
Verismo and the Ethic of Naturalism.....	32
<i>The Influence of Melodrama and the Well-Made Play on Verismo</i> .....	39
The Influence of Grand Guignol on Verismo .....	42
Chapter Three:	
The Movement Toward Realism in Operatic Acting.....	49
Realism in Menottian Opera .....	53
Decline of Grand Opera at the Metropolitan Opera .....	56
Menotti's Decrial of the Met and Calls for Reform .....	57
The Menottian Credo.....	59
Chapter Four:	
Outside Influences on American MusicaI Theatre .....	68
The Brevity Factor in Verismo .....	75
The Brevity Factor in Neo-Verismo and the Musical Play.....	76
Contemporary Forms of Broadway Opera .....	78
Menotti and Broadway Opera .....	85
Assessment: The Appeal of Menottian Opera .....	88
Assessment: Broadway Opera and the Met .....	92
Chapter Five:	
The Literary Element in Menottian Opera: An Analysis .....	97
A Dramatic Analysis .....	103
Character Analysis .....	107
Musical Analysis of <u>The Medium</u> .....	109
Vocal Writing .....	110
Leitmotifs and MusicaI Recurrence.....	113
Arias and Aria-like Structures .....	114
Observations Regarding Keys.....	115
Other Musical Devices .....	119
Chapter Six:	
Observations on the Decline of Verismo .....	124
Observations on the Decline of Neo-Verismo .....	130
Menotti and the Critical View .....	138
Survey of Criticisms of Menotti .....	142
The Demise of Neo-Verismo .....	148
Chapter Seven:	
Observable Characteristics of Neo-Verismo .....	154
The Perpetually Current or Realist Factor .....	155
The Contemporaneous Factor .....	160
The Sensationalist Factor: Melodrama .....	162
In Defense of the Traditional in Menottian Opera: An Evaluation .....	166
Conclusions and Final Statement .....	171
Bibliography .....	176

## LIST OF FIGURES

Number	Page
1. Musical example, <u>Cavalleria Rusticana</u> (Mascagni).....	1 1 1
2. Musical example, <u>Tosca</u> (Puccini) .....	1 1 6
3. Musical example, <u>Turandot</u> (Puccini) .....	1 1 7

## **Acknowledgements**

The writer wishes to acknowledge the time and energy of all the generous and caring members of my doctoral committee who have made the completion of this document possible. In particular, the writer thanks Professor James Beale for his patience, Professor Ralph Rosinbum for his sage advice and encouragement, Professor Loraine Sakata for her guidance in the finalization of the paper, and most of all, Professor Vincent Liotta for his time, his clear direction, and total support of this effort. Thanks also go to Professors Robert Dahlstrom, Joan Conlon, and Frank Guarrera.

In memoriam, the author wishes also to acknowledge and thank his dear mentor and friend, Dr. Charles Troy, without whose help in the early stages of the research this document would not have been realized.

Finally, the deepest gratitude goes to Ms. Judy Higginbotham for her kind assistance, patience, keen observation, and unselfish support throughout the entire writing of this paper.

Lovingly dedicated to Judy

## Introduction

Do modern operas resemble operatic works from the past? There is reason to believe that they do. This study compares three twentieth-century operas of Gian Carlo Menotti with a select group of *verismo* works from the late nineteenth-century. To demonstrate this resemblance, the researcher has asked, do these works exhibit a strong correspondence with one another? Are they comparable with each other in nature or tendency?

The collecting of material for this topic has led this writer to observe correspondences between Italian operatic works from the turn of the century and certain works from the modern repertoire. Beyond mere resemblances, there are many elements in the comparison that agree, which link Menotti's works with *verismo*. Such linkage has justified the writing of this comparative study.

There is agreement in the style between the earlier *verismo* and the later (coined here as *neo-verismo*), as well as an agreement in the events giving rise to style. A chronology, which reflects a pattern of recurrence between the two periods, has been a telling indicator of this agreement. Questions that have guided the research have included -- are the comparative factors able to support a musico-historical comparison? Are they persuasive? Are the comparative factors substantive?

It has been necessary to support the comparison on several levels in order to make it persuasive. Such support has included examining the leading theatrical movements of nineteenth-century Italy, i.e. melodrama, naturalism and realism. It has been necessary to take into account also the aesthetic climate of the day (of both the late nineteenth-century and the modern period), the role of commercialism and opportunism in *verismo*, and the arena of criticism and its influence on *verismo* and *neo-verismo*. In

addition, coverage has been given to roles and role-types in *verismo*, to specific dramatic elements and to the action in *verismo*, and to the language used in these operas.

Drawing a comparison between *verismo* and *neo-verismo* has posed obstacles. For example, it has required that comparative elements between periods agree as much as possible. There has also been the question of establishing the genesis of *verismo*. Where and how did *verismo* come to be? Pinpointing origins has posed challenges. The incidence of one stylistic origination point, for example, has often revealed the existence of an earlier one: Pagliacci and Cavalleria Rusticana have pointed back toward Carmen; Carmen has exhibited traits found earlier in La Traviata, and so on.

Selectivity has aided in determining the scope of the study: the fewer the factors, the easier it has been to draw comparisons. Selectivity has also permitted that more attention be given to detail. This has made the research more manageable, more thorough. Establishing clear objectives has focussed the paper considerably by defining the parameters of the comparison between *verismo* and *neo-verismo*.

The purpose of this *verismo* / *neo-verismo* comparison is to reappraise three twentieth-century American operas by Gian Carlo Menotti: The Medium, The Consul and The Saint of Bleecker Street. The writer has examined these works in light of earlier models of *verismo* with the aim of restoring to them an appreciation and a historical perspective. Understanding Menotti's works, in light of recent operatic trends and with a view to ascertaining what their true place is in the modern repertoire, has further guided the research.

The thesis of this study maintains that *verismo* and *neo-verismo* shared similar beginnings. In the case of Menottian opera, or *neo-verismo*, it contends that the taste of

the opera-going public in America changed in the late 1940's, particularly in New York. The result of such changes caused audiences to turn to an alternative, more realistic type of musical theatre which this writer will refer to as Broadway opera. The study shows that this realistic, lyrical form of theatre had its counterpart in two movements: the one led by Stanislavski on the late-nineteenth-century European stage and the later movement led by Felsenstein in pre-WW II Germany. Menotti's ability to seize and capitalize on the notion of opera on Broadway presented a unique commercial opportunity for the composer. Such an opportunity created inroads that led to his quick success. The critical opinion observed in the press and in scholarly circles reflects how divergent certain types of viewpoints were about his work. Consideration is given to what bearing such viewpoints had on the demise of this so-called Broadway opera or *neo-verismo*.

Chapter One discusses the effect of Verdian opera on the *verismo* style. It posits that late nineteenth-century musical trends contributed to *verismo*. A brief background profiles the prevalent theatrical climate of the day in mid-to-late nineteenth-century Italy. Examination is made of the economic and social particulars of the *pre-verismo* period, especially in terms of the impact such particulars had on the emergence of *verismo* and *neo-verismo*. The chapter poses five reasons for the emergence of *verismo* in Italy: the inactivity of Italian opera following Italian unification, the failure of Italian music publishers to find a Verdian successor, the intrusion of French opera in Italy, the emergence of anti-Verdian sentiment and calls for reform in Verdian opera, and the appearance of Wagnerian opera in Italy and its promotion by music publishers. Brief treatment is given to the history of Italian opera in the mid-nineteenth-century,

particularly with respect to the way that Verdian opera ceased to reflect contemporary Italian life after unification. Consideration is given to the decline in the Italian economy around 1871 and its effect on regions of the country. This decline reflects the economic disparity between the modernized north and the more agrarian regions of the south. Evidence shows that such conditions had a link with the stasis of operatic presentations in general and with Verdi's inactivity in particular up through the late-1880's. Treatment is then given to the way in which composers vied to occupy the position left open by Verdi, and to the way that music publishers of the time pushed the search for a Verdian successor. It is shown that publishers encouraged the replacement of artistic values with financial ones. A description is made of the ways in which publishers sought to stimulate the public's sensibilities.

Chapter Two defines *verismo*, its aim and its affiliation with French literary naturalism, especially in the works of Zola. It shows how *verismo* became the Italian counterpart to the French movement, the chief exponent of which was Giovanni Verga. Verga's literary philosophy is profiled. Coverage is then given to the influences of melodrama and the well-made play and to the influence of French *grand guignol* drama on *verismo*.

Chapter Three examines the movement toward realism in twentieth-century operatic acting. The theatrical principles of Stanislavski and Felsenstein are said to form the basis of such a movement. Felsenstein's exploration of the operatic medium in a way that "used music to create drama" is at the heart of this examination. Attention is then turned to realism in Menottian opera. Assessments show that Menotti drew on a realist style that was new to the time and that such a style had links with Felsenstein's

principles. The chapter briefly treats of Menotti's decrial of the Met and his call for reforms in production practices there. The study identifies Menotti's artistic philosophy, his "Credo."

Chapter Four identifies the most significant influences on the Menottian style, those that contributed to the style known as *neo-verismo*. Brevity is shown to be a major contributor to this style. The material also demonstrates that Menotti was not alone in his music-theatrical experimentation on Broadway. Menotti's contemporaries and their respective contributions are, therefore, analyzed. By comparison, it is shown that Menotti succeeded as a total man-of-the-theatre.

Chapter Five represents the production segment of this document. The first half of the chapter analyzes the dramatic elements of Menotti's first major work, The Medium (1946). Attention is drawn to the work's symbolism, its slice-of-life quality, to its elements of believability, and to its Romantic aspects of the grotesque and the supernatural. The second half analyzes The Medium with respect to the work's musical style, its vocal writing, its use of leitmotif and musical recurrence, and to the appearance of arias and aria-like structures. A brief formal analysis is made of The Medium.

Chapter Six addresses *neo-verismo* more specifically and proposes reasons for its decline in Menotti's output. The writer analyzes the prevailing critical view of the time (*ca.* 1950) and the foundation upon which theatre critics and scholars based their assessments of Menotti's style. Joseph Kerman, American musicologist, plays a key role in such assessments.

The Seventh and final chapter draws conclusions based on the material presented. Three universal characteristics revolving around the melodramatic experience in opera (realism, contemporaneity, and melodrama) emerge from these conclusions. The writer bases his reappraisal of the artistic strength of Menotti's three operas on these common, universal features.

## Preface

"The historical sense involves not only a perception of the pastness of the past, but of its presence."

-- T.S. Eliot

In order to understand the style, the meaning and the worth of *verismo*, it is necessary to see what the present holds in common with the past. T.S. Eliot's dictum above prompts a few questions. What relationship exists between *verismo* and the operas of Gian Carlo Menotti, viz. The Medium (1946), The Consul (1950), and The Saint of Bleecker Street (1954)? Do these works by Menotti say anything about the past of *verismo*? Do they attest to a *neo-verismo* movement in America in this century? Is *neo-verismo* relevant in the context of modern works? And finally, does Menotti's *neo-verismo* warrant examination? Answers to these questions are embedded in these three Menotti operas. A means of eliciting these answers is to draw a musico-historical comparison between Menotti's works and a select few late-nineteenth-century *verismo* operas. Such a comparison affords insight into the beginnings of *verismo*, its duration, and its quick demise.

Surprisingly, the same kinds of events and influences that gave rise to *verismo* approximately one hundred years ago also gave rise to Menotti's three operas. To see how this is true, it is useful to delineate a *verismo/neo-verismo* chronology. Most musico-historical accounts agree that Italian *verismo* spanned a brief period of time toward the end of the nineteenth-century -- some ten years between 1890 and 1900. By drawing a musico-historical parallel, one observes that approximately fifty years separate the two periods. For example, the premiere of Pagliacci in Rome in 1892 corresponds to the premiere of The Medium in New York in 1945; Tosca premiered in 1900, The Consul premiered in 1950; Madame Butterfly opened in 1910, The Saint of Bleecker Street opened in 1954. This chronological difference takes into account factors relating to the cultural-artistic, socio-political, even economic events of the day. The chronological

correspondence suggests that a link exists between earlier *verismo* and Menotti's operas in the twentieth-century. Before examining the work of Menotti and its catalysts, or drawing any comparisons to the earlier *verismo* repertory, an examination of the artistic conditions of *pre-verismo* Italy will prove useful.

## Chapter One

### Verismo as a Reaction to the Style of Verdian Opera

*"It is always the latest song that an audience applauds the most"* -- Homer, The Odyssey

Contrary to belief that later nineteenth-century musical trends shaped *verismo*, conclusions by Grout and others show that Italian opera at the end of the century proceeded along lines already drawn since the mid-nineteenth-century. This argues that the past, not the future, fashioned the aesthetic of opera in post-Verdian Italy. Stephen Schrader is a supporter of Grout's view. Schrader asserts that "*verismo* was the concluding phase of a longer artistic cycle." <sup>1</sup> Those who defend the more commonly held view are J.W. Freeman and Julian Budden. Freeman concludes that "*verismo* was a really new movement..." <sup>2</sup> More recently (in 1979), Budden points out that "*Mascagni's Cavalleria Rusticana* constituted the rebirth of the Italian operatic tradition." <sup>3</sup> Grout's and Schrader's opinion, which maintains that *verismo* did not, in fact, spring forth as a new musico-theatrical entity, is distinctive. It provides an opportunity to view the emergence of *verismo* in a different light.

Illustrating his contention, Schrader draws a parallel between *verismo* and Victorian melodrama on one hand, and Verdian opera and the melodrama of Hugo and Scribe on the other:

At fundament...*verismo* was the musico-dramatic equivalent of the later Victorian stage melodrama just as Verdi's early and middle period works (except for *Otello* and *Falstaff*)[sic] had been the equivalent of the earlier nineteenth-century romantic melodrama.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, says Schrader, *verismo* survived due to the music's ability to "elevate its character" in direct contrast to spoken melodrama, where the dialogue played no more than an "informative" role. <sup>5</sup> Schrader's contention finds support in Leoncavallo, whose lofty views sometimes verged on the Wagnerian with respect to tragedy and its role in Italian opera. Although it is unlikely that Leoncavallo believed his Il Crepusculum would

rival the Ring of Wagner, his daring artistic outlook on opera lends *verismo* a certain credibility. It also points up the pejorative way in which *verismo* has been characterized by critics and historians over the years, sometimes undeservedly.

Historians cite five possible reasons for the emergence of *verismo* in Italy:

- the inactivity of Italian opera following the unification of Italy,
- the failure of Italian music publishers to find a successor to Verdi,
- the intrusion of French opera in Italy,
- the emergence of anti-Verdian sentiment and calls for reform in Verdian opera,
- the appearance of Wagnerian opera in Italy and its promotion by music publishers.

It will be useful to examine these reasons for the purpose of drawing a comparison later on with *neo-verismo*.

The history of Italian opera in the mid-nineteenth-century is largely a story of Verdi, Weaver tells us. <sup>6</sup> This impacts heavily on the relative position that Verdian opera held in the life of Italy and its role in socio-political events of the time. For the better part of the nineteenth-century and up until the time of unification in 1861, Verdi's operas symbolized Italy's rallying cry for freedom and its call for independence. Grout tells us that

Verdi's operas came to play an important part in the patriotic movements of 1840's and 1850's...the librettos were filled with conspiracies, political assassinations, appeals to liberty, and exhortations against tyranny, all of which were, of course, understood in the intended sense by sympathetic audiences. <sup>7</sup>

By the early 1870's, it became increasingly evident that Verdian opera had outlived its usefulness. Those Verdian works that managed to maintain a popular place on the stage in houses like Milan's La Scala, did so more out of nostalgia than anything else. Baldacci says: "For the young Verdi the idea of opera corresponded to a precise and direct demand from society." <sup>8</sup> The once-familiar scene in the *risorgimento* years in which Verdi took his place in the pit during performances became a thing of the past. Verdi's twenty-year

absence from Milan between 1848 and 1868, arising out of quarrels with the management of La Scala, testified to this.

In addition, Verdian opera ceased to reflect contemporary life. Due to this, opera underwent serious reconsideration. After Rome was declared the capital of the unified nation in 1871, one event after another seemed to have a domino-like effect on conditions, not just social and political, but artistic as well. There occurred rifts between regions of the country, for example. These rifts polarized the social classes. Polarization, in turn, had an impact on the arts, including opera.

One can trace the root of these domino-like effects to the downturn in the Italian economy beginning around 1871:

By and large, government expenditure and revenue policies during this period [unification to 1886] constrained rather than encouraged industrial expansion...the governments budgets were constantly in the red...<sup>9</sup>

By 1890, the time of the first appearance of *verismo* opera, the Italian economy was in a decided slump:

The financial system was virtually destroyed by the crisis of 1893 to 1894...a mismanaged money supply created serious economic problems for Italy's financial history before 1893. <sup>10</sup>

This slump affected regions of the country. The north, which was fast becoming modernized, held sway over the south, which was principally an agrarian and, therefore, a more backward region. This schism between the north and south was reflective of a broader general disenchantment. Southern cities like Naples envied the political power and the wealth of northern cities like Milan. The south believed that the north had benefitted more than it had by the outcomes following unification. Leonard W. Moss in a detailed article on the subject confirms this rift and its results by saying that,

Lack of faith in a government viewed as corrupt and without justice undercut any belief in a system of legality...The monarchy...received the grudging support of the peasants from both the north and south...the *contadini* cared little for the promises of political independence or unity in 1860. <sup>11</sup>

The peasantry showed no confidence in the new Italian government. This impacted greatly on the emerging classes which in turn negated the way Verdian opera was now viewed. Most accounts point up the fact that unification had failed to fulfill the dream of the country, and

Italian opera...conforming to the new Italy, now officially united, was riven by powerful undercurrents of dissension, and of struggle between the emerging classes. <sup>12</sup>

Hence, Verdi's operas struggled to hold their place after 1861.

One can imagine how conditions might have taken their toll on opera at the time. Ducloux points out that "it [Verdian opera] ceased to be the proud symbol of unity in times of stress." <sup>13</sup>*La Perseverenza*, a leading Milanese chronicle, supported this contention in a review that said:

We are faced by one of those painful gestations, through which art is transformed, struggling with the past that the public will not deny...we are in an embattled phase where it is possible only that, in accord with the historical tradition of every intellectual change, the new will subjugate the old, replacing the known with the unknown...<sup>14</sup>

In all, Verdi's operas had become a reflection of the recent past, their function now negligible.

In a more general way, the inactivity in opera that lasted up until the late 1880's also characterized the void left by Verdi in 1871. This date is pivotal because it marked the beginning of the hiatus of sixteen years during which Verdi turned his attention to the demands of post-unified Italy, the development of his estate, squabbles with

librettists, operatic revivals and revisions of old scores. The effects of all this were felt by 1877, certainly, during which time Hagopian claims that

Innovation [in Verdian opera] was regarded with skepticism, [it was] a sign of the decline of opera, at least in the sense of a common language uniting the musician and society, such as had prevailed at the beginning of the [nineteenth] century. <sup>15</sup>

One can say, then, that the ensuing search for a direction in opera was the result of conflicting conditions of stasis and turmoil. The stasis stemmed from an artistic inactivity and the conspicuous absence of the single most important figure in the musical life of Italy; the turmoil from a social unrest between regions and the resulting inequities that prevailed between the agrarian south and the bourgeois north.

Following Aida in 1871, a number of composers vied to occupy the position left open by Verdi. Those who succeeded, or thought they did, enjoyed only short-lived success, often with only a first work and no sequel. <sup>16</sup> Marchetti's Ruy Blas (1869), for instance, enjoyed performances in 60 theatres within a two-year span. Gomes' Guaraný (1870) and Gobatti's I Goti (1873) were equally popular. For a time, the latter work even resulted in Gobatti's being hailed as "the new Verdi." <sup>17</sup>

There were other ways in which composers tried to inherit the title of successor to Verdi. Some strove to emulate the "high points" of his cantilena vocal style, for instance. Grout says this tendency shows up in attempts by later *verismo* composers "to write operas made up not of vocal high points but of melodramatic shocks." <sup>18</sup> Still others sought to imitate Verdi in the types of musical phrases that "gathered up the feeling of a scene in a concentrated moment of expression." <sup>19</sup> Even the grandeur in Verdi's operas was aped by composers like Ponchielli in La Gioconda (1876). But Ponchielli's grandeur was markedly different from Verdi's. In Ponchielli this amounted to mere "ostentations of style," not grandeur in the true Verdian sense. <sup>20</sup> Weaver tells

us that the reason these composers failed in their attempt to emulate Verdi was because they chose to distance themselves from their time, unlike Verdi, whose operas reflected the times:

Verdi had been at the heart of the struggle for Italian freedom. Now in the new struggle, many artists preferred to withdraw, to separate their art from life. <sup>21</sup>

Despite their shortcomings, post-Verdian works nonetheless carried on the high Romantic tradition. Budden says such operas represented "worthy attempts" at the Verdian style. <sup>22</sup>

It was the music publishers who pushed the search for a Verdian successor, even though, as Budden contends, "no real succession was possible." <sup>23</sup> There is no question that Ricordi, for example, saw Puccini as the true successor and made it known. The sentiment that Verdi's operas were on the way out became a later rallying cry for Ricordi's main rival, Sonzogno. His *Concorso Sonzogno* in 1883, a competition aimed at discovering the new Verdi, <sup>24</sup> was a reaction to those Verdian operas still on the stage, most notably, La Traviata, Rigoletto and Il Trovatore. Maintaining that they were dismally outdated and overplayed, the publisher went in search of "something new and different." Both Sonzogno and Ricordi felt that the public needed to be "astounded" with something more along the lines of a theatrical "sensation." By this, "they sought to combat the tendency of audiences to rest content with operas from the recent past." <sup>25</sup>

All this had the effect of altering the reason why operas were mounted, especially after 1887, the year of Verdi's return to operatic composition. While not entirely limited to it, Verdian opera up to now had been mounted for artistic rather than commercial reasons. Indeed, Verdi's publisher ceased to question the commercial success of Verdi's operas once the composer's position became well-established following unification, roughly after 1861. But with the entry of a new ethic in business, all this

changed. The artist's need to express himself to his public was replaced rather quickly by other types of incentives, financial ones, and by the need to stimulate the public's sensibilities. Freeman alludes to this when he claims that "the appearance of *verismo* at the end of the nineteenth-century was a shot in the arm for the flagging pulse of Italian opera."<sup>26</sup>

One can point to many differences in style between Verdian opera and that of other composers of the time. For example, composers after Verdi failed to see that he seldom went straight for violent effects at the expense of vocal expression.<sup>27</sup> There were always musical and dramatic reasons for sensational outbursts in Verdi. Moreover, the use of the horrific as a simple device, which virtually all later composers used, for Verdi tended to be a way of increasing the emotional value of the drama, rather than being a device of its own sake. Such trappings of the horrific exist in *Rigoletto* (1851), for instance, in the deformed hunchback, the degenerate rake (the Duke), the assassin (Sparafucile) and the prostitute (Maddalena). These symbolized not the sensationalistic, but rather Verdi's "vision of suffering humanity."<sup>28</sup> Brockett says that even Victor Hugo, who demanded the inclusion of the grotesque in art (observed in *Jongleur de Notre Dame*), avoided the sordid in his own practice.<sup>29</sup> Baudelaire's popular epithet of the day -- *Il faut épater le bourgeois* (one must shock the bourgeois) -- meant very little to Verdi if it did not also carry some dramatic *raison d'être*.

The brevity in post-Verdian works is another feature worth considering. Despite the problem Verdi had with the brief length of later composers' works, his own opera of *Don Carlo* (1867) broke with the grand tradition. In the revision of *Don Carlo* Verdi resorted to a scaled-down type of writing himself.<sup>30</sup> This revised version included the elimination of the *fontainebleu* scene. Still, while he recognized that economy in opera was necessary to some degree, he nevertheless had misgivings about violating the

grandeur of his opera. After all, there were all those melodic ideas to consider. Whereas in *verismo* the material tended to be exhausted rather quickly, in Verdi the wealth of melody needed to be accommodated by an opera of a certain length. Thus, how long an opera needed to be was of concern to Verdi. At the hands of the *veristi* this same concern took on a different character. By 1890 the call came for shorter operas. And it seemed to be instigated not by the composers themselves, but by forces from the outside, by the publishers and by the changing demand of the public.

It became evident that the "young school" was given to doing things differently, things which irritated the elder Verdi. Among other things, their dissonance was alien to him. Verdi's letters voiced these concerns:

I became wearied with so many changes in tempo, practically at every bar...the verbal accentuation is...good, but it never really scripts the dramatic situation. <sup>31</sup>

Another thing that disturbed Verdi were the choral and instrumental interludes. Admittedly, these helped to establish the mood and were very necessary inclusions to *verismo*. But unlike Verdi's interludes, which made use of a slow development progressing to a climactic moment, the interludes in *verismo* were often rent asunder rather quickly in the following scene. <sup>32</sup>

In addition, the *veristi* chose characters that, although they shared something in common with the earlier characters of Donizetti's and Verdi's works, exhibited a predilection for violence and passion. Despite this, however, there were distinct differences in the way composers handled their characters. Whereas Verdi's Manrico (Il Trovatore) and Puccini's Cavaradossi (Tosca) were both tortured offstage, in Puccini's opera the audience actually heard Cavaradossi screaming in pain. One would assume that in the Verdian view, such sadistic treatment would have tended to cheapen the scene in Tosca. The motives of both composers, nonetheless, became evident: whereas Verdi

stimulated the viewer's dramatic imagination, Puccini aroused the viewer's sensations. It typified the kinds of differences that existed between styles. It seemed that one of the very few things that the *veristi* still held in common with Verdi was the dramatic closing scene, which in both cases was highly charged. Beyond this, however, *verismo* shared little else in common with Verdi.

### **The Influence of French Opera in Italy**

In his revealing documentary on the aesthetic of nineteenth-century Italy, William Weaver points to three major concerns that were on Verdi's mind *circa* 1865, generally regarded as a critical year for Italian opera. Weaver says that

Verdi had things...that bothered him in those years: the development of the *Societa del Quartetto*, the gradual penetration of Italian opera houses by the foreign repertory and -- greatest of all these musical concerns -- the rising tide of Wagnerism, culminating in the Italian presentation of Wagner's operas.<sup>33</sup>

While all three concerns disturbed Verdi, the most immediate concern pressing upon him was the emergence of anti-Verdian sentiment in Milan.

Milan at mid-century was and continued to be through the end of the century a cultural stronghold for artistic events in Italy. The opera house of La Scala and the Milan Conservatory were here, literary figures abounded in the city, leading journals such as *La Perseveranza* and *La Lettura* held sway on public opinion, and in a general way, most of the change and modernization affecting Italy was focussed here. Here, too, a group of musicians calling themselves the *Societa de Quartetto* promoted the performance of chamber and symphonic music. At the heart of the group's philosophy was a strain of anti-operatic (and therefore anti-Verdian) sentiment that was quickly gaining in popularity. In the membership of the group numbered certain artists who were coming into recognition like Franco Faccio, Emilio Praga, Giuseppe Rovani, Giulio Ricordi and Arrigo Boito.

The Milanese *Quartetto* modeled itself on similar groups in Florence and in Rome. The group in Rome was headed by Giovanni Sgambati, a pupil of Liszt and a composer, pianist, and teacher in his own right. All three groups shared the same ideology: to foster the performance of instrumental works of all kinds, often disguised as foreign music. The *Quartetto* specifically called for a renewal of the Italian spirit in music, in keeping with the precepts of the *risorgimento*, and held progressive views on the "future" of music. For Verdi, all this had certain threatening implications.

A letter, written by Boito and published in *La Perseverenza*, voiced the belief of the *Quartetto*. For Verdi, the letter had an adversarial tone in its reference to a "defilement of the Italian altar of art," for Verdi read "art" to mean "music." Entitled *To Italian Art*, the letter said:

Here's health to Italian art! May it escape for a moment from the bonds of the old and the foolish, to emerge young and healthy...May the man already be born who on the altar will set art erect again, chaste and pure: on that altar befouled like the wall of a brothel. <sup>34</sup>

Verdi answered with a letter of his own in typical pragmatic fashion:

I have read the article where I found big words like *Art*, *Aesthetic*, *Revelations*, *Future*, etc, etc. And I confess that I, great ignoramus that I am, understood nothing...Arguments fail to persuade anyone, opinions are often fallacious...if... a new path... is destined to place art again erect on the altar now ugly as the stench of a brothel, so much the better...<sup>35</sup>

Both letters serve to validate that change was transforming the Milanese artistic scene. Not only were musical societies such as *il Quartetto* speaking out against what they regarded as the excesses in opera, there were also indications that foreign music was carving a lasting place for itself in Italy. French grand opera, for instance, with the aid of the *opéra comique*, was regaining an old foothold in Italy, one it had known in the early years of the nineteenth-century. Hagopian tells us that as early as the mid-1860's, composers

took preference to the novelties of European music...the cultural ambitions of Meyerbeer...the elegance of Gounod...[and] the dramatic ideals of Wagner. <sup>36</sup>

Italian opera was thus coming under increasing influence from abroad, and specifically from France. <sup>37</sup>

That the French legacy in Italian opera reemerged after mid-century was not surprising. The grand operas of Meyerbeer (translated into Italian) had enjoyed popularity on the Italian stage in earlier years, particularly in Rome. Le Prophete and Les Huguenots piqued the public's interest, Weaver tells us. In the 1859-60 season, the mainstay of mid-Romantic French grand opera, Faust, played at La Scala with outstanding success. <sup>38</sup> What audiences liked most about French opera was its larger-than-life approach to its subjects, the very same qualities that Verdi sought to portray in his own works. One can see the Meyerbeerian influence in Verdi's middle period opera, I Vespri Siciliani (1855).

The libretto of French grand opera as developed by Scribe was expansive, usually in four or five acts, and it made use of a historical or quasi-historical background. <sup>39</sup> Scenes were colorful and allowed for a considerable amount of spectacle. These grand operas also often tended toward the supernatural, the allegorical, and the exotic. Auber's Robert Le Diable or Massenet's Roi de Lahore exemplify this. Meyerbeer's personal strength lay in depictions of local color, atmosphere and dramatic conflict. Winton Dean states that the dramatic focus of grand opera in general is characterized by the way in which historical forces play on the psychology of characters. <sup>40</sup> Consequently, the younger generation, after 1860 in cities like Milan, showed preference for such novelties in French music.

It is apparent that a new means of expression typified this period of opera in Italy and that the French were unquestionably leading the way. Massenet made inroads

for Puccini by the treatment he gave his fragile heroines, Heriodade, Manon, Sappho, Thais and Charlotte in Werther. Moreover, Puccini was already familiar with Murger's works. He knew that a stage adaptation had been made in 1849 under the title of *La Vie de Boheme*. In search of innovation himself, even Verdi was enticed from his highly personal style by the coloristic technique of Berlioz and Meyerbeer. <sup>41</sup>

Hoover tells us that the French deplored the vulgarisms of Verdi after 1865. Verdi's style was contrary to the French proclivity for pleasant drama, engaging music, ballet, and for plots that adhered to literary distinction, elements that essentially described the style of the *Opera Comique*. <sup>42</sup> Such conditions favored the premiere of French works in Italy; works like Bizet's Carmen and Ambrois Thomas' Mignon and Hamlet,<sup>43</sup> operas which were promoted by the firm of Sonzogno, the rival of Ricordi, Verdi's publisher. French opera thus heralded the end of the old relationship between itself and the Italian public. In its place something new took hold. This new philosophy was steered by what Hagopian calls the "publicity" business [*sic*], by the large music publishing enterprises of the day which saw the need to astound the public <sup>44</sup> with the newest in French theatrical innovation.

The upshot of all this was that in spite of Verdi's entrenched status, there was talk of decadence and of reform needed in theatres. <sup>45</sup> In comparative terms, the artistic and cultural conditions in Italy by 1871 somewhat resembled the urgent fiscal conditions in the arts in America during the Great Depression of the 1930's. In Italy, economic constraints prompted the curtailment of subsidies for theatres and forced taxes to be imposed on contracts and profits. Music conservatories like those in Milan and Rome saw considerable reform also. <sup>46</sup> Unusually enough, and to his great displeasure, Verdi was appointed to administer many such reforms.

Several facts emerge from the foregoing. It can be said 1) that the rising tide of anti-Verdian sentiment was felt by the Milanese public and by Verdi himself; 2) that a new operatic ethic was straining to come to life in Milan; 3) that French theatrical innovation was intruding upon Italian opera and helping to uproot the Verdian tradition, and therefore, 4) that French opera, as "foreign music," was now paving the way for the advent of *verismo*.

### **Wagner's Influence on Italian Opera**

The extent to which Wagner influenced opera in the late nineteenth-century cannot be understated. Budden tells us that Wagner supplemented the French influence in Italian opera until a new synthesis was reached with Cavalleria Rusticana in 1890.<sup>47</sup> By all indications, *verismo* represented an intense reaction to Wagner. It followed the lead of Verdi, who made it clear he had no use for Wagner's theories and regarded the Wagnerian ethic as dangerous<sup>48</sup> to Italian operatic composition. Nevertheless, there were composers like Arrigo Boito who sided with Wagner, though his views differed from Wagner's somewhat. Boito believed that the Verdian formula had seen its day, and although he did not totally agree with Wagner's ideology, he knew that a change, in operatic principle at least, from the old to something new, was overdue and very necessary if Italian opera was to keep pace with the times. Thus, composers of the *scuola giovine* or "young school" were highly receptive to calls for change. A few, like Leoncavallo and Catalani, fervently advocated change in terms of the Wagnerian ethic (Leoncavallo even sought to emulate Wagner: his search for a new panorama for Italian patriotism in his Florentine Renaissance setting of Il Crepusculum is the product of his admiration for Wagner).<sup>49</sup> Others, like Cilea and Puccini, held on tightly to tradition and to the dictates of a more personal style.<sup>50</sup> In all, diversification came to characterize *verismo* opera, especially after 1900. Moreover, this *stilo del diverso* (as

Baldacci called it) became the product of a commercial push on the part of music publishers like Ricordi, Sonzogno and Lucca to draw audiences in. While the *diverso* style exemplified much of *verismo* opera, particularly all later works, the style also served to confuse historians in their attempts to neatly categorize the form.

There can be no doubt that conditions for change were ideal in Italian opera especially in the post-unification period between 1871 to just before 1890. Italy underwent some twenty years in which conditions slowly ripened for the entry of *verismo* into Italian opera. Hagopian tells us that during that time

...the true face of...Italy...can be seen not in the large scale operas on historical subjects (which continued to appear) but in [things such as] the salon song, a genre cultivated by refined singing teachers like Gaetano Palloni and Filippo Marchetti at Rome, Gaetano Braga at Milan, and the greatest of them all, Paolo Tosti, the darling of Roman aristocratic society...[In such] songs Tosti caught the...intimacy and the sentimental sheen characteristic of the age of Umberto I behind its facade of pomp and grandeur (which inspired, for instance, the building of the Teatro Costanzi at Rome in 1880).<sup>51</sup>

Such descriptions testify to the coexistence of certain artistic opposites<sup>52</sup> at the time, a hallmark of the late Romantic age not just in Italy, but throughout Europe. These opposites found their manifestation in the lengthy naturalist novels of Zola, Balzac, and Flaubert on one hand, and in the *veristic* mini-novels of Giovanni Verga, Capuana, and De Roberto on the other. By the same token, Verdian grand opera had its own counterpart in the small-scale works of *verismo*. Grout corroborates the notion of the "artistic-opposite" by saying that

the veristic opera was as typical of the post Romantic period as dissonance, hugeness and other musical devices which were used to titillate jaded sensibilities.<sup>53</sup>

At one end of this "artistic-opposite" spectrum was Wagnerian opera. Its entry into the Italian opera house in 1871 was second only to French opera. One recalls that

Wagner was the third (of three) major concern on Verdi's mind at this time. Even though Wagner's theoretical writings had been known for some time, the Italian public had not yet seen his music dramas performed. Lohengrin was the first of Wagner's operas to appear on Italian soil. It premiered in Bologna in 1870, followed in 1871 by Tannhauser. Unlike the works of the Ring, both Lohengrin and Tannhauser were nearer to grand opera than to any *gesamtkunstwerk*. Not surprisingly, both operas were well accepted, and they had reason to be. The *avveniristi*<sup>54</sup> in Milan (as the *Societa de Quartetto*) and the pro-Wagnerite group in Rome under Sgambati had already paved the way for their welcome.

The music publishing firm of Lucca, the third major publisher of the time, also welcomed Wagner but for entirely different reasons. By obtaining the exclusive Italian rights to Wagner's operas, Lucca saw a unique way to compete with Ricordi. It had long since acknowledged Ricordi's monopoly of Verdian opera. In earlier years, Francesco Lucca (a professional clarinetist at La Scala who had apprenticed for a time with Ricordi) had held the rights to three of Verdi's early operas<sup>55</sup> and shared with Ricordi the ones to Nabucco. Unfortunately, through a *faux-pas* on a business matter, Lucca managed to breach Verdi's trust.<sup>56</sup> It is said that Verdi's own dislike for Giovannina Lucca, the man's young wife, who later became the company owner, had much to do with her pro-Wagnerian views. It is at this point, Ajani tells us, that rivalries between Lucca and Ricordi increased.<sup>57</sup> Emerging out of all this was the fact that the Wagnerian repertory was there for the taking. Lucca saw the unique opportunity and took it before anyone else did.

Lucca's noted progressive views had a long history: in earlier years it had published an *avant garde* periodical called *L'Italia Musicale* (later renamed *L'Italia Libera*). The Lucca home, apart from its fame as a meeting place for Mazzinian

conspirators (Garibaldi and Cavour held rendezvous here), had also long since been a popular stronghold for the *avveniristi*, the Italian musical "futurists."<sup>58</sup>

With the take-over of the company in 1862 by Giovannina Lucca, the enterprise gained in strength and position. Giovannina took an active role in promoting her husband's business and through her efforts *Casa Lucca* enjoyed success with the operas of Mercadante, Catalani (*Edmea*), Gomez (*Il Guarany*), and Marchetti (*Ruy Blas*). Lucca had owned the Italian rights (since the 1860's) to Gounod's *Faust*, Halevy's *La Juive*, and Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine*. But her greatest achievement was undoubtedly the acquisition in 1868 of all of Wagner's works, for which she paid 10,000 Swiss francs.<sup>59</sup> The scope of the Lucca enterprise grew and there is little question that it threatened Ricordi. At Verdi's urging and after protracted negotiations, Ricordi finally absorbed Lucca in 1888.<sup>60</sup>

In view of the take-over by Ricordi, Lucca's promotion of Wagner contributed indirectly to the emergence of *verismo*, not because it was especially like *verismo*, but because Wagner facilitated the emergence of it. Wagner challenged Verdian opera on Italian soil, thereby enhancing the future position of *verismo*.

There is evidence that Wagner enjoyed a strong following in Italy, in both musical and literary circles. A prominent figure in these circles (and a staunch opponent of Verdi in the beginning) was Arrigo Boito. A recognized intellectual in Milan, Boito headed the progressive Milanese literary movement known as the *scapigliatura*.<sup>61</sup> Boito's group

stood against traditional values, both aesthetic and religious...it aimed at enlarging the scope of the various arts by breaking down the barriers that separated them. Their subject matter inclined to the bizarre and even to the blasphemous...it [the *scapigliatura*] attacked the remaining bastions of post-Rossinian tradition.<sup>62</sup>

In a sense, the group voiced a political disenchantment, too. Brash, bohemian and belligerent, the *scapigliatura* reflected the disillusionment following the first enthusiasm over Italian unification.

Boito exhibited considerable talent both as a composer and translator of opera. His real mark was made in later years in the capacity as Verdi's librettist for *Otello*, *Falstaff*, and the uncompleted *King Lear*. With his fellow *conoscenti*, Boito saw evidences that Italian opera was in decline. In response, he "was determined to forge Italian opera anew through closer ties with literature and the abolition of conventional forms."<sup>63</sup> Boito outlined four objectives in a *manifesto* that expounded the thrust of the movement. It posed alternatives to the Verdian formula. The *scapigliati* sought

the complete elimination of formula...the creation of form...the realization of the largest possible tonal and rhythmic development possible and...the supreme incarnation of drama.<sup>64</sup>

Although the role of the *scapigliatura* was largely adversarial, members were divided in their regard for Verdi. Certain circles remained loyal to Verdi and chose to continue to honor him; the opposing *conoscenti* preferred not to. This latter circle called Verdi's operas "noisy" and abusive of choruses and martial rhythms.<sup>65</sup> Sentimentality was seen as a bad influence. *La Traviata* was said to evince this trait in its contemporary setting.<sup>66</sup> Boito's contentious association with Verdi<sup>67</sup> may have prompted his decision to side with the latter group of the *scapigliati*. A man of strong personal principles, Boito clearly had his own views about the future of Italian opera. He held to them in spite of the fact that they ran contrary to Verdi's.

For all his differences with the composer, Boito looked to Verdi for his model. He was a compatriot and deeply cared about Verdi. Even though he was not prone to admit it, Boito's presence at Verdi's bedside when the elder man died attests to it. On another level, Boito cared about Italian audiences, too: how they felt, what they liked and how they

reacted. As far as his "futuristic" leanings went, Boito's real concern was over the future of opera, Italian opera. In this sense he was first and foremost a compatriot, an Italian rather than a Wagnerite. The fact finds support in the shifting allegiance Boito underwent over the years with regard to Wagner. Ashbrook tells us that his beliefs on Wagner vacillated from time-to-time. Boito's distaste for the music of Richard Strauss further supports the rather tenuous connection he held with the Wagnerism.

It is apparent that the *scapigliatura* arose out of the revolt of certain youthful artists who sought to change the existing system and were, no doubt, in earnest about doing so. But despite their pronouncements (in journals like the *Giornale della Societa del Quartetto*), they failed to replace the Verdian formula with anything more substantive. For all its merit, the proposal of the *scapigliati* did not venture beyond theory. Even despite its many sympathizers, individuals with whom Boito shared strong artistic views, the movement as a whole reflected no more than its leader's idealism, his sincere passion for change in the artistic life of his country. In the larger picture, the mark Boito left on Italian music is greater than the sum of any of his theoretical accomplishments. <sup>68</sup>

Boito's innovative influence on Verdi was formidable, especially in light of accounts that Verdi was not easily given to change. Verdi faced increasing difficulty both in his personal and public life in this regard, especially after 1860. Budden confirms that efforts by the composer to update his style proved burdensome. Weaver tells us Verdi's letters attest to a stubborn nature. <sup>69</sup> Consequently, even though he successfully absorbed new ideas into his work, at Boito's behest, particularly in *Falstaff* and *Otello*, his operas continued to manifest the character of Romanticism. One can say that his preeminence to the end of the nineteenth-century was founded entirely on this fact. It is possible to understand, then, that the strength of his output, of all his operas except

Falstaff and Otello, *would* wane in time. Even Verdi's strong position in European social and artistic circles, however formidable, posed no great hindrance to the emergence of "something new and different." Furthermore, the expressed opposition that Verdi faced in Italy by the 1870's ultimately worked against the composer and in favor of *verismo*. Admonishments in the name of idealism such as those made by Boito and Faccio in *La Perseverenza* tended to stimulate the decline in Verdian opera even further.

The chief indicator of the decline in Verdian opera, then, was change. The fact that Verdian opera had become outmoded and ceased to reflect the socio-political spirit of the day attested to it. The enterprising activity on the part of publishers generated further change. Such activity served to dramatize how much the economic climate of the time impacted on all opera, Verdian and *verismo*.

In conclusion, both Verdian and Wagnerian opera helped to alter the artistic face of Italy. Prior to *verismo*, Verdi had already sifted from Wagner's style whatever could be assimilated into the Italian temperament. While the *veristi* exhibited typical characteristics derived from Wagner in the use of leitmotifs and the relative importance accorded to drama over music, these characteristics were, in fact, the result of Verdian influence on the *veristi*, rather than a direct Wagnerian influence. In toto, *verismo* opera represented a natural development of ideas long evident in Verdi. His development from the work of his middle period to Otello clearly pointed the way for Italian composers who came after him -- Mascagni, Leoncavallo, Puccini and others of the *scuola giovine*.

## Notes to Chapter One:

- 1 Stephen Schrader, "Realism in Nineteenth Century Opera: A Comparative View" (Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1983), p. 331, 508.
- 2 John W. Freeman, "Two Views on Verismo," Opera News, 30 March 1953, p. 2.
- 3 Julian Budden, "Verdi and the Contemporary Italian Operatic Scene," in The Verdi Companion, ed. William Weaver and Martin Chusid (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979), p. 102.
- 4 Schrader, "Realism in Nineteenth Century Opera," p. 330.
- 5 Coincidentally, Schrader attributes the demise of melodrama to this latter fact as well. *Ibid.*
- 6 William Weaver, The Golden Century of Italian Opera (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1980), p. 151.
- 7 Donald Jay Grout, A Short History of Opera (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), p. 362.
- 8 Viola Hagopian, "Italy: Art Music, Twentieth-Century" in New Grove Dictionary of Music, vol. 9 (New York: Macmillan, 1980), p. 379.
- 9 John S. Cohen, "Economic Growth of Italy" in A Topical History of Italy Since 1861, ed. Edward R. Tannenbaum and Emiliana P. Noether (New York: New York University Press, 1974), p. 174.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 193.
- 11 Leonard W. Moss, "The Passing of the Traditional Society in the South" in Modern Italy: A Topical History since 1861, ed. Edward R. Tannenbaum (New York: New York University Press, 1974), p. 152-53.
- 12 Weaver, The Golden Century of Italian Opera, p. 210-12.
- 13 Walter Ducloux, "Opera Today: Thought and Observations" in Musical Offering: Essays in Honor of Martin Bernstein (New York, 1977), p. 113.
- 14 The newspaper review is on Franco Faccio's Profughi fiamminghi of 1863. Weaver, Golden Century, p. 158.
- 15 Viola Hagopian, "Italy: Art Music, Nineteenth-Century" in New Grove Dictionary of Music, vol. 9 (New York: Macmillan, 1980), p. 378.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 373.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 Grout, A Short History of Opera, p. 441.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 Hagopian, "Italy: Art Music, Nineteenth-Century" p. 377.
- 21 Weaver, The Golden Century of Italian Opera, p. 210-12.
- 22 Budden, "Verdi and the Contemporary Italian Operatic Scene" p. 102.
- 23 Budden contends that no succession was possible because Verdi summed up all the best in an era. *Ibid.*, p.105.
- 24 Weaver contends this.
- 25 Hagopian, "Italy: Art Music, Twentieth-Century" p. 379.
- 26 Freeman's comment addresses the economic decline that worried publishers at the time. Freeman, "Two Views on Verismo," p. 2.
- 27 Edward J. Dent, Opera (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1940; reprint ed., Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1965), p. 115.
- 28 Andrew Porter, "Giuseppe Verdi" in New Grove Dictionary of Music, vol. 19 (New York: Macmillan, 1980), p. 655.
- 29 Oscar G. Brockett, The History of European and American Theatre and Drama Since 1870 (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 493.
- 30 Porter, "Verdi" in New Grove Dictionary, p. 655.
- 31 Budden, "Verdi and Contemporary Italian Operatic Scene" p. 103.

- 32 Grout, A Short History of Opera, p. 440.
- 33 Weaver, Golden Century, p. 171.
- 34 Ibid., p. 158.
- 35 Ibid., p. 160.
- 36 Hagopian, "Italy: Art Music, Nineteenth-Century" p. 376.
- 37 Grout, A Short History of Opera, p. 508.
- 38 Weaver, Golden Century, p. 156.
- 39 Such historical dramas were typically tense, tragic tales of human passion set against a background of war against an invader or of a popular rebellion. They were lavish in setting and archaeologically accurate. The genre of the historical drama in *Verismo* took its cue from the Scribean model.
- 40 Winton Dean in The New Grove History of Opera, ed. Stanley Sadie (New York: W.W. Norton), p. 205.
- 41 Kathleen O'Donnell Hoover, Makers of Opera (New York: Beechhurst Press, 1955), p. 149.
- 42 Ibid., p. 156,158.
- 43 Stefano Ajani, "Sonzogno" in New Grove Dictionary of Music, vol. 17 (New York: Macmillan, 1980), p. 529.
- 44 Hagopian, "Italy: Art Music, Twentieth-Century" p. 379.
- 45 Hagopian, "Italy: Art Music, Nineteenth-Century" p. 376.
- 46 Budden, "Verdi and Contemporary Italian Operatic Scene" p.102.
- 47 Ibid., p.102.
- 48 Dent, Opera, p. 91.
- 49 The work, however, was left unfinished in the 1890's.
- 50 Mascagni's own unsuccessful venture in the Wagnerian style was to come later in the composition of his opera, Parisina (1912), based on a text by D'Annunzio.
- 51 Hagopian, "Italy: Art Music, Nineteenth-Century" p. 376."
- 52 The phrase is borrowed from a lecture on Romantic opera, given by Dr. Charles Troy at the University of Washington (Seattle), summer, 1986. Dr. Troy's exact phrase was "the interpenetration of artistic opposites."
- 53 Donald Jay Grout, History of Western Music (New York: W.W. Norton, 1960), p. 608.
- 54 The *avveniristi* were musical "futurists." Boito, Faccio and their followers held progressive views resembling those of Wagner's. Milan, Rome, and Florence were centers for Italian Wagnerites.
- 55 The Verdi operas were Attila, Il Corsaro, and I Masnadieri.
- 56 Apparently, Lucca had slighted Verdi by depriving him of a lucrative venture in England. Verdi was slow to forgive, it seems, and in reaction he turned to Ricordi as his permanent publisher.
- 57 Stefano Ajani, "Lucca" in New Grove Dictionary of Music, vol. 11 (New York: Macmillan, 1980), p. 299.
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 Ibid.
- 60 The price for the acquisition was 1 million lire. Ricordi acquired about 40,000 titles. Ibid.
- 61 Literally, "dishevelment." The term was derived from the novel by Cleto Arrighi, La Scapiagliatura il 6 Febbraio of 1862. The founder of the *scapiagliatura* movement was Giuseppe Rovani.
- 62 Julian Budden, "Italy" in New Grove History of Opera, ed. Stanley Sadie (Basingstroke: Macmillan, 1989), p.176.

- 63 Ibid., p. 97.
- 64 *Figaro*, 21 January 1864.
- 65 Hagopian, "Italy: Art Music, Nineteenth-Century" p. 376.
- 66 Ibid.
- 67 Although, admittedly, it became a close relationship later.
- 68 William Ashbrook, "Boito" in New Grove Dictionary of Music, vol. 2 (New York: Macmillan, 1980), p. 867.
- 69 Hagopian, "Italy: Art Music, Nineteenth-Century" p. 377.

## Chapter Two

### Verismo: A Definition

While scholars and commentators differ on a definition of *verismo* in operatic terms, most agree on a definition of *verismo* as a literary subject. Donald Jay Grout says *verismo* means "truthism."<sup>1</sup> He is among those who hold that such a definition applies more to the literary than the operatic form of *verismo*. Differences about what operatic *verismo* is revolve around which composers are *verists*, which operas are *veristic* and whether the term applies to a school or a period. Scholars disagree also on the artistic merits of operatic *verismo*. Some, like Carner and Weaver, argue it has a redemptive musical-dramatic value, however limited, while others, like Kerman, claim it possesses no such thing. There is, however, one fact upon which all agree: that it was unquestionably Mascagni who made the public aware of *verismo*.<sup>2</sup> Two of the more noteworthy historians, Grout and Dent, concur that Cavalleria Rusticana marked the beginning of operatic *verismo* in 1890, and that the operatic trend was at least ten years long, possibly longer. Indeed, disagreement seems to exist more over the end of *verismo* than over its inception.

In his Short History of Opera, Grout identifies the aim of *verismo* as

simply to present a vivid, melodramatic plot, to arouse sensation by violent contrast, and to paint a cross section of life without concern...[for] any general significance [which] the action might have.<sup>3</sup>

He states that *veristic* music "aimed simply and directly at the expression of intense passion through melodic or declamatory phrases," everything being so arranged that the "moments of excitement followed one another in swift climactic succession."<sup>4</sup> Descriptions such as "intense passion" and the succession of "exciting, climactic moments" are critical to an understanding of *verismo* in its melodramatic context.

Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Music ascribes "starkly realistic" qualities to *verismo*, maintaining that realism comprises its chief aim.<sup>5</sup> Baker's asserts that

"the...development of the dramatic [idea] is condensed to enhance the impression." <sup>6</sup> This "condensed" dramatic idea, which Grout himself describes as a *gathering* of dramatic events, <sup>7</sup> is one of the most distinctive characteristics of the form. The notion becomes central to an understanding of the length, or rather the brevity, of these operas. "Condensation" or "compression" (as Grout calls it) addresses more than the length of a typical *verismo* opera. Grout qualifies the term "compression" by saying it has a link with the language of the libretto. He says it is a concomitant to the *stretto* observed in the musical style of *verismo*. <sup>8</sup> In the final analysis, one recognizes that *verismo* is the product of the composer's intention to "compress," or gather, the musico-dramatic fabric, a practice frequently observed in *fin de siècle* works. <sup>9</sup>

#### **Verismo and the Ethic of Naturalism**

The premiere of Cavalleria Rusticana in 1890 thus set the stage in Italy over the next ten years for numerous, similar kinds of theatrical presentations. Those operatic works that followed Cavalleria Rusticana, such as Pagliacci and Il Tabarro, made use of proven features such as contemporary settings, lower class characters, swift-paced action, violence, even adultery in certain instances. <sup>10</sup> All these elements typified *verismo*. Other elements such as the appearance of maimed characters, plays-within-plays, brevity, compression of dramatic action, and a device known as the "slice-of-life" also came to characterize the *verismo* style in time.

The *squarcio di vita* or *tranche de vie* (slice of life, or more accurately, *chunk* of life ) remains one of the most striking yet one of the most overlooked features of *verismo*. According to Hinton, the *tranche de vie* is the heart of *verismo*, it constitutes its purpose. <sup>11</sup> Because of its strong ties with the naturalist literature of the time, the *tranche de vie* appeared in numerous works throughout the late nineteenth-century. In French opera, it found its way into the work of Charpentier in Louise (1900). Here the

picturesque setting of the Montmartre in Paris echoed Puccini's La Boheme of four years earlier. Compared to Puccini's, Charpentier's opera is more subtle, more realistic, in spite of the fact that its socialist viewpoint is less typically *veristic*. The element of poverty, also observed in La Boheme, stands out as a strong hallmark of the *tranche de vie*,<sup>12</sup> as does the mood of *verismo*. Mood, too, is immeasurably important. The closing scene of Louise, typifies the mood in many of these operas. It is noteworthy that the theme of the opera may have been revolutionary for the stage perhaps, but not for the literature of the day. The right of a woman to live her own life without interference from parents or society echoed themes found in the novels of Balzac, the Goncourt brothers, Daudet, Flaubert, and Zola. These were writers with clear ties to the naturalist movement of the time. Zola's themes, in particular, were the most popular and the most imitated. His views on naturalism were espoused in three major works: Therèse Raquin (1873), the Experimental Novel (1881), and Naturalism and the Theatre (1881).

Zola's views echoed revolt, a revolt against the excesses of sentimentality and the extravagance of Romanticism. Zola had an absorbing interest in psychological phenomena and social problems. Quite convinced that the novel could assume the status of scientific authority, he adopted an experimental method of inquiry and applied it to his writing. Charles Bernard's treatise on the scientific method, Introduction a la médecine expérimentale (1865), heavily influenced and formed the basis for Zola's probing style. Zola advocated Bernard's methods by saying,

In every respect I shall keep behind Claude Bernard. My own work is nothing but compilation...it will be sufficient to substitute the word "novelist" for "doctor" to make my thoughts clearer and to give them the power of scientific truth.<sup>13</sup>

Through the novel, Zola examined the way in which a person's heredity and environment affected him. Issues such as alcoholism, poverty, and disease became primary topics of

study. He believed strongly that heredity and environment were the primary determinants of human fate.

Criticisms waged against Zola's ideas argued that he failed to go beyond mere doctrine, that his experimentation <sup>14</sup> oversimplified the complex question of human interaction and behavior. Regardless of this, considerable good came out of Zola's work. His creative efforts served to point up the exigencies of social problems in his day. His avowals served as catalysts that turned peoples' attention to solving such problems. The social ethic he propounded was in keeping with the ideology of the time which said that only social forms of organization could insure equality to all. <sup>15</sup>

Of Zola's three principal works, two concerned themselves with theories in drama. His doctrines in drama sought to bring to the stage neither an approximation of real life, nor an idealization of it, but a "slice of life," again, the *tranche de vie*, in all its harshness. Only then was it possible to examine it as a scientist might. The result was that out of these dramatic theories came a number of traits that characterized drama as *naturalistic*: a dearth of sympathetic characters, a pessimistic or ironical ending, few climaxes and a slow progression of events toward a cynical outcome. <sup>16</sup>

Zola's *roman*, Therèse Raquin, became the first consciously conceived naturalist play. Following its appearance as a novel, it was adapted to the stage in 1873. The preface of the play, doctrinal in tone and content, espoused most of Zola's important theatrical views. The play itself presented only the facts of nature. There was little or no intrusion of personal philosophy. <sup>17</sup> And like most naturalist plays, Therèse Raquin also had earmarks of melodrama in the form of murder and retribution.

With the promotional support of theatre owner Andre Antoine, Zola's principles gained currency and had an impact on both acting styles and stage settings. Zola's form of naturalist acting was guided by simplicity and an adherence to truth. It replaced the

overblown oratorical manner of the French stage. Antoine's settings served also to complement Zola's directives to his actors. His sets were severe in a way that supplanted the elegant backgrounds that audiences were familiar with. His designs for the *Theatre Libre* reproduced unadorned physical reality. A typical stage picture might reveal cluttered settings, actors turning their backs to the audience, and disorganized, unsynchronized talk. Such exact replication of detail for Antoine was the way to play up the relationship between cause and effect, a notion at the very heart of Zola's theories.

Zola's theories on drama gained considerable currency in France. Things done in the spirit of science permitted him to command a certain influence over his dramatist contemporaries, too. Followers like the playwright Henri Becque, for example, aped his style as well as his themes. Becque advocated Zola in his refusal to avert his attention from the sick, the ugly, and the oppressed for subject matter. In his play of The Vultures, for example, Becque portrayed the fleecing of a family of women by their supposed friends following the death of their father. Like Zola, Becque stressed the *tranche de vie* style which he derived from Zola's work. In all, Zola's and Becque's dramas had tremendous significance, owing to the uniqueness of the form and to the fact that no one else was doing the same thing in quite the same way; not in France.

In Italy, the naturalist movement took a slightly different form. It came to be known as *verismo*. While Franco-Italian relations were never consistently cordial, they improved considerably toward the end of the century. International social conditions thus favored the germination of literary *verismo* in Italy, particularly in Milan. It was here that *verismo* took root and flowered, following in the style of Zola, Flaubert and De Maupassant. Its chief exponents in Italy were Giovanni Verga, Federico de Roberto and Luigi Capuana.<sup>18</sup> For twenty of his most productive years (between 1872 and 1892) Verga lived in Milan. Here he frequented the literary salons of the city, making a name

for himself. Though he wrote a quantity of works on Milanese subjects, his more noteworthy works were stories of his native Sicily. *La Lupa*, *I Malavoglia*, and *Cavalleria Rusticana* fall into this category. A close friend of Verga's, Capuana advocated Verga's philosophy. He too was "keenly interested in psychological problems...and shared with Verga [like] views on true and natural writing." <sup>19</sup> It can thus be said that the spirit of naturalism, as *verismo*, was very much in the air.

The difference between *verismo* and naturalism was slight. Whereas naturalism aimed to rid literature of all idealization and give a faithful picture of reality using the scientific method for its basis, the *verismo* credo of Verga and Capuana had two parts to it:

first, the author must "disappear" so that the described incident can give the impression of an actual happening...the story tells itself; secondly, the language used must fit and characterize the individuals. <sup>20</sup>

In the opening sentences of his short story, *Gramigna's Mistress*, Verga puts forth his philosophy confirming the first point above:

...the hand of the artist will remain absolutely invisible, only then can it have the imprint of an actual happening; the work of art will seem to have made itself...to have come into being spontaneously...without retaining any point of contact with its author. <sup>21</sup>

The second aspect of Verga's philosophy, the language, strongly characterized literary *verismo* and was Verga's greatest innovation. It consisted of echoing the manner of Sicilian peasant speech by the "cantilena."<sup>22</sup> This was accomplished by stringing words together in such a way that the verb was repeated at the end of a sentence. A line from *Cavalleria Rusticana* illustrates this:

*"Per voi tirerei tutta la casa, tirerei."*<sup>23</sup>

Verga condensed the narrative of his novels as much as possible also, eliminating everything except what seemed absolutely indispensable; that which could not be

suggested between the lines. Additional features of Verga's style included the use of elements such as poverty, violence, love, jealousy, struggle for survival and desire for wealth, characteristics which for the most part carried over into operatic *verismo*.

There is evidence that Zola and Verga met on several occasions. Ternois and Alexander describe two of these reunions, and it is possible there may have been more. At their first meeting in 1882 in Medan, Verga presented Zola with his novel of I Malavoglia. Alexander suggests that the first personal contact proved disappointing.<sup>24</sup> At a subsequent meeting held in Rome in 1894, the atmosphere was more cordial. It is at this meeting (in the company of Capuana and the journalist Lucio D'Ambra) that Verga irritated Zola by defending his personal view on *verismo*. In a discussion with Zola (Verga was fluent in French), he defended his use of the Italian term *verita* over the term *vérisme*. The former more closely reflected his belief, Verga held. The latter merely described something "akin to truth."<sup>25</sup>

There is also evidence that the influence between Zola and Verga was reciprocal. Research by Ternois has shown this and Alexander points out that

if Zola's La fortune des Rougon consciously or unconsciously served as the model for [Verga's] Ciclo dei vinti, Verga's I Malavoglia acted as eliciting agent for Zola's Joi de vivre.<sup>26</sup>

It can be said that Verga's work held ample fascination for composers who came after Verdi. Weaver affirms that the spirit of *verismo* was present in the "musical air as well as in the literary air."<sup>27</sup> Grout and Dent concur with Weaver that naturalist tendencies preexisted in operas such as Bizet's Carmen, which fifteen years later came to influence such works as Cavalleria Rusticana. Bizet's opera, like Mascagni's, had also shocked its audiences with its frank depiction of life among the lower orders.<sup>28</sup> Hence, the character of Carmen (stylistic and ideological) paved the way for *verismo*.

It was Leoncavallo, not Mascagni, who postulated a credo for operatic *verismo* in the prologue to his opera of Pagliacci (1892):

Ma non perdirvi, come pria:  
 "Le lacrime che noi versiam son false!  
 Degli spasimi e de' nostri martir  
 non alarmatevi!"  
 No! l'autore ha cercato invece  
 pingervi *uno squarcio di vita*  
 Egli ha per massima sol che  
 l'artista e un uom  
 E che per gli uomini scrivere ei deve  
 Ed al vero ispiravasi.<sup>29</sup>

One observes an intentional reference to the naturalist *tranche de vie* in the use of the *squarcio di vita* above. Well-educated, Leoncavallo held strong views on tragedy. His use of the form of the prologue looked back to an earlier tradition of stage representation in the period of the Italian Baroque. Also, by stating his purpose in prologue form he was following a custom in nineteenth-century literature of postulating the thesis of a work in its preamble or its preface.

Espousals of the naturalist view such as those by Leoncavallo, once Verga and Capuana got hold of them, quickly gained currency in Italy. They cut across all lines of art in the late-nineteenth-century, including literature, drama, painting and music. In drama, and in *verismo* opera as well, the *veristic* ideal was as much a reaction to naturalism in Italy as it had been in France. On the stage, everything that was real was said to be found in nature, conceived as the world of objects, actions, and forces. These were the driving elements behind Leoncavallo's characters. Mascagni himself, in turn, found in Verga's brief novel a way of unearthing human character through music and displaying it on the stage.

### The Influence of Melodrama and the Well-Made Play on Verismo

The influence of French melodrama on Italian opera is evident throughout most of the repertory. *Verismo* retained the melodramatic imprint in the way effects were exaggerated and in the importance placed on shock value. Ashbrook points out that once the initial effect of melodrama wore off, it tended to leave all audiences except those in Italy relatively unimpressed. <sup>30</sup> This explains why the *veristi* could still rely on melodrama to

present a vivid melodramatic plot, to arouse sensation by violent contrasts, [and] to paint a cross-section of life without concerning themselves with any general significance. <sup>31</sup>

History now records that melodrama, like *verismo*, saw an early demise on the late nineteenth-century stage. Commentators (like Ashbrook) point to the sensationalist factor as perhaps the only redeeming feature of the form and the attribute most responsible for its popularity. In comparing melodrama to *verismo*, Schrader argues that if it had not been for music's ability to elevate the character of *verismo*, it too would have failed to survive. <sup>32</sup>

Virtually all *verismo* composers utilized melodramatic effects as a way of generating popularity for their operas. The works of Mascagni, Leoncavallo, Puccini, Cilea, Giordano and Franchetti share this fact in common. In this regard, Mascagni emulated Zola, whose intense naturalistic drama of Therèse Raquin treated murder and retribution, elements which are at the very heart of the melodramatic construct. Puccini relied on the effectiveness of melodrama until as late as 1918, when it served as the basis for Il Tabarro, an opera that Grout refers to as "a veristic melodrama." <sup>33</sup>

One can say that the melodrama has its roots in the early *commedia* style. Its popularity is derived from the way it reflects the experience of the common folk, the *bourgeois*. In this respect it stands apart from classical tragedy wherein the hero is

elevated by station (in which a prince becomes a king, for instance). In melodrama, the hero is usually a commoner, a person of the "folk." And since its roots are in *bourgeois* theatre, familiar stock-type characters appear in these works.

In the second quarter of the nineteenth-century, the term melodrama referred to a musical entertainment, literally "a play with music."<sup>34</sup> These melodramas were fast-paced, violent, and generally played up the war between good and evil. Audiences of the time had a particular fondness for plays performed to music, in which the music served as incidental accompaniment, as intermezzi, dances, or songs. Extant examples of such melodramas are Felix Mendelssohn's musical score for Shakespeare's play, A Midsummer Night's Dream; another is Bizet's incidental music (now in the form of a suite) to Daudet's play, L'Arlésienne. With its resemblance to the German *Sturm und Drang* tragedy, the melodrama evolved and grew in likeness to the dramas of Pixerecourt, to Gothic horror and to crime thrillers.<sup>35</sup> This type of melodrama, therefore, came to refer to

a sensational or romantic play with interspersed songs, which tended to exaggerate conflicts and emotions; the melodrama was characterized by stereotyped characters, whose utterance and action could be described as sensational or highly emotional.<sup>36</sup>

The intrusion of a moral tone into melodrama becomes obvious in the French works of Dumas  *fils* and Augier. This moral tone in melodrama had allegorical implications and recalled the medieval *morality play* of the fourteenth-century. In the *morality play*, a mortal protagonist shared the stage with embodiments of the Virtues and the Temptations. In Dumas, however, the moral content gave the melodrama its realistic character. These *pièces a thèse* or *thesis plays* (as they came to be called) served just and good ends. They addressed social issues of the day and generally raised the moral tone of their times. The dramas of Alexandre Dumas  *fils*, for instance, drew on class

distinctions and played up differences between the poor and the nobility. <sup>37</sup> Dumas' *La Dame aux Camelias* (1852) exhibits this tendency. Always socially conscious, Dumas *filis* is said to have declared;

If I can exercise influence over society...if I can force people to discuss the problem and lawmakers to revise the law, I shall have done more than my part as a poet; I shall have done my duty as a man...<sup>38</sup>

These pronouncements foreshadowed avowed by Zola in his naturalist work of Therèse Raquin.

With the stage works of Eugene Scribe and Victorien Sardou the melodrama took on a construction described as "well-made." Here, theatrically effective scenes were set in motion by an ingeniously clever plot. Such plots depended on a number of disparate details that were brought together at the end. The formula for the *pièce bien-fait* consisted of:

- a careful exposition and preparation,
- a cause and effect arrangement of dramatic incidents ,
- a building of scenes to a climax,
- the use of withheld information,
- some startling reversals, and
- the use of suspense.

These "well-made" plays had great currency in Paris during the first half of the nineteenth-century. The primary focus of the "well-made" play was not on characterization, but on a tight succession of arresting incidents. These incidents tended to be unrealistic, however, and they made the characters seem unrealistic, too. <sup>39</sup>

As heir to Scribe, Sardou's fame rested on the perfection of this clock-work type of drama. <sup>40</sup> Sardou is noted also for the plays he wrote for "stars" of the period, stage personalities such as Sarah Bernhardt, Virginie Dejazet and Henry Irving. The French actress Bernhardt virtually made her career on roles from "well-made" dramas. Sardou's La Tosca (1882) and Fedora (1887) were two of her most prominent.

Grout tells us that there was already plenty of precedent for *verismo* in the works of Donizetti and Verdi.<sup>41</sup> The call for stronger melodramatic situations in libretti was answered by Scribe. His dramas were the source for the libretti of two of Verdi's operas, I Vespri Siciliani and Un Ballo in Maschera. Donizetti set altogether five Scribe texts, including La Favorita. The point is pertinent because by the end of the century, the "well-made" play had assumed the guise of a "historical drama." In this guise it strongly interested *veristi* composers like Cilea, Giordano and Puccini. Adriana Lecouvreur (1849) by Scribe became the vehicle for Cilea's opera (1902). While libretti based on Sardou's La Tosca (1882) and Fedora (1887) served as sources for the operas by Puccini (in 1900) and Giordano (in 1898).

#### The Influence of Grand Guignol on Verismo

Of all the attributes that *verismo* inherited from the outside, those derived from French *grand guignol* drama are the most striking and the most distinct. There is no denying that *guignol* drama held a rather dubious place in the theatrical life of nineteenth-century Europe. It can be argued, however, that this type of drama had an immediacy of appeal during its time. It is precisely the *guignol* quality in *verismo* that caused it to burn fast and furiously and, predictably, to fizzle out rather quickly.

Many historians agree that *guignol* drama passed on its more questionable qualities to twentieth-century dramatic art, in the form of gratuitous violence, flimsiness of plot, and sordid setting. Yet, its more redeeming aspects, such as vivid emotional realism, strong characterization, and an expressed empathy for the lower strata of humanity, were universally present in the *fin de siècle* works of the spoken and the lyric theatre. German opera saw the manifestations of *grand guignol* in such works as Wozzeck and Lulu by Berg and Salome and Elektra by Richard Strauss. In the French repertoire these tendencies appeared in Camille Erlanger's Aphrodite<sup>42</sup> (1906). In *post-*

*verismo* Italian opera, *guignol* drama showed up in Montemezzi's La Nave (1908) and Zandonai's Francesca da Rimini (1914). Today, most of these operas own a respected place in the arts world. The works of Berg, Strauss, and Zandonai in particular have, after all, outlived others and continue to be performed.

Supporters of *guignol* drama called the *guignol* play

the most Aristotelian of Twentieth-century dramatic forms, since it was passionately devoted to the purgation of pity and fear. <sup>43</sup>

Here was a genre of French theatre that played in a gross manner on the viewer's emotions. These dramas depicted

a raw, adolescent kind of desire: incest, patricide, blood lust, sexual perversion, a fascination with bodily mutilation and death; a loathing of authority; a fear of insanity; and an overall disgust for the human condition and its imperfect institutions. <sup>44</sup>

The enduring place in the repertoire of the operas mentioned above, then, has legitimized the use of eroticism, extravagant language, heightened melodrama and horror, <sup>45</sup> traits that have characterized such operas as *fin de siècle* works.

The decidedly morbid fascination of early nineteenth-century audiences with sensational plots, criminal behavior, and savage punishment was insatiable, Gordon tells us. Its appeal stemmed from the grisly events that characterized the French *reign of terror* of the late eighteenth-century. Pixerecourt and the dramas of the *Boulevard du Crime* catered to this kind of thirst in audiences:

In his [Pixerecourt's] plays, everything began with the complete victimization of poor and innocent people by a cruel, corrupt oppressor...followed by a struggle that concluded with a swift, almost divine punishment against the agent of iniquity. <sup>46</sup>

In a similar vein, there existed also a type of French sensationalist *broadside* that saw rather popular dramatization on the *guignol* stage. The *faits divers*, a very unique type of stage presentation of the Parisian *Boulevard*, ran concurrently with the cheap

melodramas of Pixerecourt. *Faits divers* were brief tabloid-like news items that recounted particularly gruesome events of the day. Again, such sensationalist accounts had their beginnings in late eighteenth-century France.

From the time of the French Revolution to the 1930's specialized French newspapers and weeklies provided their readers with realistic and gory accounts of true-to-life crime stories and their bizarre *denouements*.<sup>47</sup>

The *faits divers* treated plot and character in much the same way that the Pixerecourt melodrama did, with three notable differences:

- the *faits divers* were usually short in length, often just minutes long
- the *faits divers* made use of a vindictive ending, often a disturbing one (unlike the happy ending of the melodrama)
- the *faits divers* plots were taken from real life, not from the playwright's pen.<sup>48</sup>

Late-nineteenth-century Italian audiences were not that different from French audiences when it came to graphic theatrical depictions. Thus, it is not surprising to see that this type of dramatized *yellow journalism* somehow found its way to the Italian operatic stage of the time.

The genesis of Leoncavallo's opera, *Pagliacci*, illustrates the incidence of the *faits divers* in Italy. The composer (who provided his own libretto) based his opera on a supposedly true incident that occurred when he was still a boy in Montalto. The real event involved an actor in a touring company who had murdered his wife after, not during, a performance. Apparently Leoncavallo's own father had presided as the judge at the murder trial and the story in its entirety qualified as a perfect subject for a *veristic* setting. The culprit's real name was Alessandro, not Canio, and after being found guilty, he was sentenced to a term in prison. The dailies of the time are said to have carried the gruesome story. In the aftermath, Alessandro is said to have cried, "I do not repent the crime! On the contrary, if it had to be done over again, I would do it!"<sup>49</sup>

The Italian version of this sensationalistic *faits divers*, came to be known as the *cronaca nera*, loosely translated as "the black chronicle" or "crime thriller." Silvio D'Amico affirms its existence and its link to *verismo*:

Il superstite carattere romanzesco della vicenda e dei personaggi di *verismo* cade con la Cavalleria (1890) di Mascagni, che presenta *semplice gente del popolo e una vicenda da cronaca nera ...e proprio alla cronaca nera s'ispirarono i Pagliacci* [1892] di Leoncavallo. Questo identifica l'atto di nascita del teatro musicale *verista*.

The surviving romantic character of the events and the personages in *verismo*...is inherited by Cavalleria (1890) by Mascagni, which presents simple country folk and events that are based on the crime thriller <sup>50</sup>...it is precisely this type of *black tabloid* that inspired Pagliacci [1892] by Leoncavallo. This identifies the way in which the musical-dramatic form of *verismo* was born. <sup>51</sup>

The characters that D'Amico identified in his discussion were "gypsies, smugglers and bullfighters," or individuals of the "lowest rank of society" at the time. The events themselves were linked to an "ambience characterized by conspicuous local color." <sup>52</sup> However colorful the ambience may have been, there was no denying it was also sordid. Dent and Weaver each alluded to this point when they said,

*Verismo* put the slums of Paris on the stage with picturesque theatrical effect. <sup>53</sup>

Within a few years there were numerous operas about the poor, the rural and the urban. Neapolitan slums were favorite milieu in such operas as Santa Lucia by Tascia (1892), Mala Vita (1892) by Giordano and Maruzza by Florida. <sup>54</sup>

Thus, as part of the greater French *guignol* melodramatic experience, which included Pixerecourt and the gothic horror drama, the *faits divers* brought its influence to bear on *verismo*.

One can point to three *veristic* features that emerged directly from *guignol* drama. These were:

- Brevity -- seen in the way events were compressed, in the short duration of the theatrical presentation, in a fast-paced action ultimately leading to a climax and a quick ending which itself was often vindictive and disturbing,
- Violence -- seen in the displays of murder, torture and suicide, the arousal of sensation, and certain emotional outbursts, and
- Sordidness -- demonstrated by vivid, starkly realistic renderings of adultery perpetrated by lower class characters.

It should be noted that the second and third characteristic above, violence and sordidness, can be found in naturalistic drama. The latter point serves to prove this writer's contention that the naturalistic drama of Antoine and its later offshoot in Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty* were all part of the same widespread movement in French Theatre that began in the late 1880's.

## Notes to Chapter Two:

- 1 Donald Jay Grout, A Short History of Opera (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), p. 608.
- 2 William Weaver, The Golden Century of Italian Opera (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1980), p. 205.
- 3 Grout, A Short History of Opera, p. 440.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Bakers Biographical Dictionary of Music, 1984 ed., s.v. "Verismo."
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Grout expands on this comment by saying that the brevity is due not so much to the concentration of the action as it is to the rapid exhaustion of the material. Grout, SHO, p. 440.
- 8 *Stretto*: A dovetailing effect in music, as in a fugue, where one musical subject imitates another in such a way that the two statements overlap. In *verismo* opera, the analogy refers to a gathering or compression of (mostly) dramatic events.
- 9 Grout, SHO, p. 442.
- 10 Stephen Schrader, "Realism in Nineteenth Century Opera: A Comparative View" (Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1983), p. 14.
- 11 James W. Hinton, "Strong Wine Soon Watered," Opera News, 30 March 1953, p. 24.
- 12 Grout, SHO, p. 437.
- 13 Alfred Alexander, Giovanni Verga (London: Grant and Cutler, 1972), p. 75.
- 14 Zola's term, *expérimental* is more properly understood as *empirical* or *experiential*.
- 15 Oscar G. Brockett, The History of European and American Theatre and Drama Since 1870 (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 550.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 551.
- 17 Edward McNall Burns, Western Civilizations: Their History and Their Culture, 6th ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1963), p. 813.
- 18 Weaver, Golden Century, p. 205.
- 19 Alexander, Giovanni Verga, p. 65.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p.77.
- 21 Giovanni Verga, La Lupa and Other Stories (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958), p. 86.
- 22 Here the word "cantilena" addresses to a lyrical usage of text. The term is borrowed from its more traditional usage in music.
- 23 Translation: "For you I would lift the whole house up, I would." There is a resemblance here to a similar tendency in dialectical British English speech; in cockney, for example.
- 24 Alexander, Giovanni Verga, p. 75.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 76-77.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 78.
- 27 Weaver, The Golden Century, p. 205.
- 28 *Ibid.*
- 29 "But not to tell you, as of old: 'the tears we shed are false! Do not alarm yourselves over our sobbing and our martyrdom!' No! Instead the author has tried to depict a slice of life for you. He has for a maxim only that the artist is a man, and that he should write for men and be inspired by the truth."
- 30 William Ashbrook, "Boito" in New Grove Dictionary of Music, vol. 2 (New York: Macmillan, 1980), p. 867.
- 31 Grout, SHO, p. 440.
- 32 Schrader, "Realism in Nineteenth Century Opera" p. 330.
- 33 Grout, SHO, p. 444.

<sup>34</sup> From the Greek *melos* and *drama*, or "musical drama" in the ancient sense of the term.

<sup>35</sup> In London, the legalization of theatres in 1843 made musical accompaniment no longer necessary and London theatres either dropped the music or limited it to a few effects. This is how the term came to refer to a contrivedly sensational, romantic, moralistic, and sentimental genre of playwrighting.

<sup>36</sup> Webster's New World Dictionary, concise edition, 1982.

<sup>37</sup> Brockett, The History of European and American Theatre, p. 494.

<sup>38</sup> Ethan Mordden, A Fireside Companion to the Theatre (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), p. 92.

<sup>39</sup> In time, George Bernard Shaw bitinglly criticized Sardou's well-made plays as "sardoodledum."

<sup>40</sup> The Sardou plays which have survived include Diplomacy, Mme. Sans-Gêne, Divorçons and Tosca.

<sup>41</sup> Grout, SHQ, p. 440.

<sup>42</sup> Libretto by Louis de Gramont, from the novel by Pierre Louÿs.

<sup>43</sup> Mei Gordon, The Grand Guignol: Theatre of Fear and Terror (New York: Amok Press, 1988), p. 2.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Patrick Smith, The Tenth Muse, (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1970), p. 359.

<sup>46</sup> Gordon, Grand Guignol, p. 7.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>49</sup> Henry W. Simon, One Hundred Operas (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1960), p. 365.

<sup>50</sup> The *cronaca nera* is the Italian version of the French *faits divers*.

<sup>51</sup> Silvio D'Amico, ed., Enciclopedia dello Spettacolo (Roma: Casa Editrice Le Maschere, 1962), p. 1597.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Edward J. Dent, Opera (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1940; reprint ed., Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1965), p. 97.

<sup>54</sup> Weaver, Golden Century, p. 206-207.

## Chapter Three

### The Movement Toward Realism in Operatic Acting

The Stanislavskian "method" of realistic acting, which had long been current in the spoken theatre, entered the operatic arena in 1921 in Moscow. This highly *subjective* acting technique embodied the essence of Stanislavski's teachings. Its first influence on American actors occurred when members of the Group Theatre adopted the Stanislavskian "system" as their own around 1925.<sup>1</sup> It came to be referred to as the "method." Stanislavski disliked nineteenth-century so-called "classical" methods of acting, including oratorical declamation, the idea of *pathos*, and the notion of the "star" system. His essential tenet was that realism found its inner truth in character and character development. The dramatic "given circumstance" was said to be critically essential in this respect.

As part of its adaptation to opera, Stanislavski's "system" exposed performers to daily training exercises conducted to music, vocal improvisations and the singing of arias intended to promote freedom and onstage responsiveness. An objective of his teaching was the achievement of musical expression vis-a-vis diction and language in song.

Walter Felsenstein's experiments in Weimar Germany then raised the "system" of Stanislavski to a new plateau on the European operatic stage. Felsenstein explored the operatic medium in a way that "used music to create drama." He subjected music to the laws of theatre by making it serve the dramatic action.<sup>2</sup> His directives to singers formed an essential part of a lyric theatre philosophy that stressed that opera must be plausible theatre. This philosophy emphasized believability above all and insisted that both acting and singing should be a convincing, authentic and indispensable means of human expression."<sup>3</sup>

For Felsenstein, the center of all activity was the singer-actor, who became "the major contemporary factor in the development of realist musical theatre." <sup>4</sup> This new breed of performer was responsible for knowing his/her role (as well as the entire opera) at the deepest, even the most spiritual level. This entailed making the role "perceivable" to the performer's audience ("*ablesbar*" in Felsenstein's words). Together with a thorough knowledge of the score, Felsenstein demanded absolute clarity of action from his singers. These rigors were reflected in the "team" relationship shared by all the members of Felsenstein's casts.

Felsenstein further believed that singer-actor and audience should be at opposite ends of the theatrical spectrum, where both, not just the former, participated in the onstage event. The performer mastered his skill in a manner characterized as "unified." The audience, in turn, was urged to open itself up to the singer-actor's performance. This collaboration allowed the performer to balance out both technique and the range of emotional expression. Checks were integrated into the singer-actor's training, insuring that no one skill was emphasized at the expense of another. The "litmus test" was convincing the audience that the singer's part could be communicated only as song. At no time was the voice ever held up as an object of ecstasy nor was "beautiful melody" ever given the dominant role. The singer achieved his objective solely through his realist abilities onstage.

An aspect of Felsenstein's realism was reflected in a directing style that involved placing the emphasis, not on the visual, but on the "psychological adherence to the plot." This notion said that production values rested more with an emphasis on plot and theme development, than they did on any outward appearance of style. This shift in emphasis yielded a performance and a style of singer-actor said to be so well conceived that the visual aspects themselves displayed a conformity to realism.

In line with this ideal, Felsenstein also maintained that libretto and score were to be considered as one, particularly in pre-rehearsal situations. Texts to operas like Die Fledermaus, Falstaff and Les Contes d'Hoffman, for example, were edited, re-edited and original sources consulted in an attempt to reconstruct the composer's original intention. This type of pre-production work made it considerably easier for contemporary audiences to relate to these operas. In all, Felsenstein's basis for realism rested upon:

- the idea that the singer-actor was the center of all stage activity and was given the responsibility of making the stage work "perceivable." This involved clarity of action as well as an understanding of the score,
- the partnership that the singer-actor shared with the audience, which invited the latter's participation, making it an integral part of the action,
- ridding the performance ethos of cliché and meaningless gesture,
- the work's and the performer's "truthful adherence to the plot" in the kind of attention given every detail of the production -- from the development of a character's role, to an integration of libretto and score, and ultimately to the technical elements. All aspects were made to faithfully adhere to the realist message of the piece.

Felsenstein thus catalyzed the realist direction in European opera. He effected his specific realist methods in order to rid operatic acting of the stereotypical cliché and gesture common to most performances of his day, performances which most European audiences at the time had come to know and accept as standard practice. The impact that Felsenstein had on his singers was evidenced by the numbers of singers who in time became fine singer-actors. <sup>5</sup> Many of them had been only minimally trained in stage movement at first and knew little beyond the studied, stylized "conventions" of the operatic stage. Like most operatic performers, these singers believed that the operatic stage would never go beyond the conventions of "stylized" acting. <sup>6</sup> Following their exposure to Felsenstein, however, they ceased to believe that realistic acting was for the

legitimate actor alone. <sup>7</sup> Felsenstein helped to revitalize outworn theatrical values which had long become neglected in the routine course of producing commercial opera.

From this it may appear that Felsenstein's realist staging methods largely mirrored Stanislavski's. The fact is that differences between the two were slight. On one hand, where Stanislavski's "system" prompted the singer to "follow" the spoken text into the sung, Felsenstein's method involved singing-acting right from the start, even to the point of making the actor believe that he "sang when his emotional state reached such an intensity that the expression could no longer be conveyed through speaking." <sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the Stanislavskian singer-actor was encouraged to "absorb" the characterization and "identify with its actions and desires" to which Felsenstein added his own "layer of heightened emotion." In all, Felsenstein's methods actually built upon Stanislavski's by broadening the performance base of the performer. It is worth mentioning that Stanislavski's "system" was initially intended solely for actors; only later was it widened to include opera singers. By contrast, the Felsenstein method dealt with problems of the lyric stage at the very outset, based as it was on the notion of the "singing human being". Hence, rather than being a departure from them, Felsenstein's methods amplified upon Stanislavski's. They "fine tuned" the performer's technique, thereby obtaining clearer results.

While evidence exists to support each director's considerable influence in realist theatre, it is Felsenstein's work that more thoroughly realized the goal of *Musiktheater*.

He conceived

of the operatic performance in which nothing was superfluous or disjointed; a staging in which music and movement merged to such a degree that visual image and sound became reflections of each other, seemingly motivated by the actions and temperament of the singing human being. <sup>9</sup>

Up until then, Felsenstein's ideology reflected the most mature level of realism ever adapted to the lyric stage. More importantly, it signaled a rebirth of opera in Europe, a new coming of age revealed to audiences, performers, and critics alike. Paul Bekker's words in 1935 supported this view:

It shows that opera is looking towards new fields to conquer. It shows that a fundamental change of point-of-view has taken place. In the new attitude is rooted the new problem of the opera and with it the impulse to create.<sup>10</sup>

In another sense, Felsenstein's work also represented the completion of a cycle begun around the turn-of-the-century by set designer Joseph Gregor at the Komische Oper in Berlin. Here realism gained its greatest impetus in Light Opera performed on an extended-run basis. Imaginative direction by modernists like Max Reinhardt included such realist techniques as the use of cycloramas and three dimensional scenery.<sup>11</sup>

From the above one may begin to glean how Felsenstein's *Musiktheater* credo had its links with Menotti's brand of *verismo*. Felsenstein's practices served as the immediate backdrop to events in the United States. For what had been true for the lyric stages of Germany became increasingly true for the American stage as well: by the 1930's, realism had gained entry into American opera.<sup>12</sup>

### **Realism in Menottian Opera**

Gian Carlo Menotti was one of many American composers in the post-war era to confront the issue of realism in American opera. The composer wrestled with questions which characterized the more general temperament of operatic composition in the mid-twentieth-century: had grand opera outlived its usefulness? were realist subjects worthy of consideration in modern opera? was the declining attendance of American audiences at the opera house sufficient grounds for change in the operatic form? were there viable theatrical alternatives for the American opera composer? was Broadway one such alternative? and so on.

Menotti wanted to draw on the realist style then relatively new at the time; indeed, one that was very new to opera. While a student at the Curtis Institute of Music, he frequented both the opera in Philadelphia and in New York. And he frequented Broadway as well. Here he gained a perspective on realism in theatre, in particular. He thus became familiar with the formalist principles of Stanislavsky through plays and also through his frequent visits to Europe. To say, however, that Menotti derived his realist ideas solely from Stanislavski would deny the influence of Walter Felsenstein, whose work Menotti had occasion to observe in his visit to Austria during the pre-war years.

John Gruen recounts that after graduation from the Curtis Institute in 1933, Menotti and fellow composer Samuel Barber vacationed in Vienna with intentions of moving there. It turned out their stay lasted a year. Walter Felsenstein was chief producer of the Cologne Opera and Menotti's travels in Austria during this time, at one point to the Salzburg Festival, <sup>13</sup> found the young American composer immersed in that country's social and artistic coterie. Gruen tells how Menotti

moved easily and with panache among Vienna's artists, intellectuals and high society. They attended the city's concerts...by Toscanini, Bruno Walter, Lotte Lehmann, Maria Jeritza and Elizabeth Schumann...Vienna's social arbiters took up the pair, inviting them to an endless round of parties and introducing them to the city's *haute monde* and the internationally known artists accepted by them.<sup>14</sup>

In Vienna he savored the operatic life. More importantly, he culled the realist theatrical concepts which later surfaced in his works, in The Medium and The Consul. It was not long after such exposure that Menotti was admonishing his actors over *believability* in acting; namely, that if it is not verifiable, it is not utilizable as dramatic business. <sup>15</sup>

After he moved to New York following the successful premiere of Amelia at the Ball in 1938, Menotti allied himself with singers whose acting talents lent themselves

easily to realistic portrayal. Marie Powers was one such a singer. Powers was a contralto who grew up in Mount Carmel, Pennsylvania. She had studied at Cornell University and at the Royal Conservatory in Florence, Italy. After a performance stint in Europe, she returned to the United States and sang with the old San Carlo Opera Company. Her move to New York brought her to the attention of many fine directors and critics on Broadway. Olin Downes described her as "an exceptional singer...a great actress." <sup>16</sup>

Powers' singing-acting talents epitomized what Menotti was looking for in a realistic performer. In The Medium, Powers drew all the attention. Commanding and formidable, Powers caused even the most stagestruck to forget they were at the theatre rather than at the opera house. <sup>17</sup> Douglas Wyatt called the scene in which Baba grapples with her fear "one of the most powerful on the current stage."<sup>18</sup> Even actress Tallulah Bankhead and conductor Arturo Toscanini extolled the praises of Powers. Time magazine caught Marie Powers being congratulated backstage by Bankhead after one of her performances. Bankhead reportedly fell on her knees and exclaimed,

I have been moved by three performances in my lifetime: John Barrymore in Hamlet, Jean Eagles in Rain and you...this is the only play that has thrilled my soul and chilled my guts! <sup>19</sup>

In summary, it can be said that Menotti, together with his American colleagues, faced the question of altering the traditional form of opera in an attempt to make it conform to more current and contemporary taste. In a broader sense, this involved drawing upon realist subjects for his operas. For all its tradition, Menotti recognized that grand opera as a creative force had outlived its usefulness in America. It was now seen as devoid of believability. The absence of realism in productions at Metropolitan Opera together with the prevailing attitude of Met management toward audiences gave Menotti occasion for concern. Where was opera headed? Critics themselves pointed to insufficiencies and a clear lack in production standards, particularly at the Metropolitan

Opera. By seeking out singer-actors and drawing on the realist principles of both Stanislavski and Felsenstein, Menotti was heralding a new day for musical theatre, and opening up a brand new market for opera in New York.

### **Decline of Grand Opera at the Metropolitan Opera**

*Mismanagement at the Metropolitan Opera following the Depression brought the opera company into disarray. The economic status of the Met in the years before, during, and after World War II vacillated between marginal and fair. The truth was that the financial status of the company through these years was far from sound. Mayer feels that in many ways Edward Johnson was mostly to blame for the Met's troubles during most of this trying time.* <sup>20</sup> After Edward Ziegler's retirement in 1946 (and his death at the end of that same year), Johnson was on his own in business matters and in casting for productions. His musical assistant, Frank St. Leger, had equal say in casting, but "the frequency with which light-voiced people sang heavy roles (and heavy-voiced people lumbered through light ones) became distressing, apart from the question of whether artists and roles fitted together in temperament or in style." <sup>21</sup> It seemed also that Johnson had no particular care about the quality of scenery, either. With the appointment of Rudolf Bing as the Met's new general manager in 1950 came news that all previously existing conditions would change in the opera house. One announcement told of Bing's intention to

improve the visual aspect of opera so that the sights would be more harmonious with the sounds. <sup>22</sup>

This meant that Bing had plans to "modernize [current] stage techniques." <sup>23</sup> It entailed bringing in Broadway directors to produce the Met's productions and foremost painters and designers to mount them. <sup>24</sup>

Bing drew a new audience to the theatre. He brought to the Met a galaxy of directors from the theatre: Alfred Lunt, Tyrone Guthrie, Jean Louis Barrault, Jose Quintero, Peter Brook, Franco Zeffirelli, and others. <sup>25</sup>

Shrewd observer that he was, Bing was aware of the marketability of Broadway. He conceded Broadway's overriding success in its competition with the Met. A marked changeover in management style from Johnson to Bing can therefore be said to be measurably responsible for bringing back to the Metropolitan Opera much of the audience it had lost to Broadway through the 1940's.

#### **Menotti's Decrial of the Met and Calls for Reform**

While it was formally announced that change had taken place at the Metropolitan Opera at the point of management changeover (from Johnson's to Bing's administration), such change was mostly cosmetic. There remained an administrative practice at the Met that cast doubt on whether artistic renewal was truly in effect. If there had been such a renewal, it would have been evident in the offering of new works at the opera house.

Elsewhere at this time, movement was underway in the presentation of realistic opera, particularly on college campuses such as those at Columbia University, the Curtis Institute and at other similar academic locations nationwide. Menotti saw these changes coming, the reduced-scale work, the realistic performance environment, and he endorsed them. Because of his growing popularity, it was a matter of time before his position on American new works reached the wider public. And it finally did. In a Metropolitan Opera broadcast interview (Saturday, February 16, 1952) hosted by Boris Goldovsky at the outset of the Rudolf Bing regime, Menotti pointed to the sad state of affairs in American opera. He decried

the Met's reluctance to produce American composers' works, calling the Met *cowardly* in its attitude toward commissioning new works: "...small opera companies with an even more limited budget seem to take chances, but the poor little Met prefers to be a museum rather than a creative artistic institution." <sup>26</sup>

By this, Menotti was calling attention to the fears of the Metropolitan Opera regarding new works. He blamed the opera company for becoming routinized. He said it was "so afraid of a flop, all its activity was now reduced to repainting sets for Aida." <sup>27</sup> Such remarks turned the tone of the interview around, pointedly. Menotti suggested that he

would feel much happier if, instead of asking composers to come and speak at the opera house, the Met would ask them to come and hear their operas performed here.<sup>28</sup>

It may have been his intolerance for the lackluster performance standards of grand opera that prompted Menotti to vent such invective on the American bastion of opera. Intolerance with things as they were may also have had something to do with the entry of realism into his works. In any event, Menotti went on record to say that the grandiose in opera was now obsolete. It was, he contended, responsible for the inexcusable economic decline of American opera at the time. In his own words:

It is significant that theatres built for use by opera companies are seldom known as theatres; they are "opera houses." And they are two, three times

larger than other theatres. Now if we grant that opera tends toward the grandiose, can we justify the overblown dimensions of the modern opera house? For all its claims of museum status, it rarely produces the works of Meyerbeer, that prophet of operatic gigantism, and even the so-called grand operas of the regular repertory would not be cramped in a theatre of more modest size. <sup>29</sup>

The telling point of Menotti's argument, however, cited fiscal losses:

opera has lost, perhaps forever, well over half of the public that once supported it...the opera house is now less of a theatre than a self-avowed museum. <sup>30</sup>

It can be said that much of the composer's acrimony toward the Met was no more than a dutiful, concerned response for the decline of contemporary opera in general. It constituted a plea for support of American opera by the larger houses, the Met in particular. Even though the Metropolitan Opera had produced two of his works <sup>31</sup> since

the end of the Depression, Menotti had not been entirely pleased. Indeed, the press described him as "no admirer of the Met."<sup>32</sup> The upshot of Menotti's remarks in time thus served to arouse a much needed reevaluation of the performance ideals in commercial opera.

### **The Menottian Credo**

Menotti's views on opera in America were *avant garde* for their time. His advocacy of realism, by way of renunciatory remarks against the grandiose in opera, and his plea for more tolerance regarding new American works in the repertory set the tone for a long artistic battle that would continue to be waged right up to our own time. This battle was to be fought over the balance of artistic and economic values.

Menotti held marked artistic convictions about his work. They reflected his youth and his idealism together with an undaunting optimism over what he felt was possible in the operatic medium. The Menottian "Credo" (term coined here) represents, in the judgement of this writer, what Menotti stood for and what he believed in, artistically.

For Menotti, the audience held the primary role as "receptor to the artist's creative intentions."<sup>33</sup> The one "means of gauging a high artistic standard in the operatic theatre," Menotti urged, was "through audience response."<sup>34</sup> In this he was one with his contemporary, Walter Felsenstein, who also strove to regenerate the dynamic between performer and audience. Furthermore, Menotti championed Felsenstein's outlook on realism with his own conviction, stating that

the high standards which audiences should come to expect in opera are relatable in degree to the spontaneous reactions which made the European premieres of the 1920's so exciting and alive.<sup>35</sup>

Edward Rothstein summed it up by saying that Menotti alone "found a way to bring together contemporary opera and the ordinary listener."<sup>36</sup> Hence, Menotti and

Felsenstein shared the same view that "immediacy of communication" with audiences was one real measure of performance effectiveness.

Menotti's ability to communicate with his audiences corresponded to his sensitivity to them, also. He believed that music should make its point and communicate its emotion. Conversely, a lapse in the connection between composer and audience was representative of "the artist's insensitivity to his medium." Even the argument of the artist's prerogative, wherein the creator of an art work was the only one capable of gauging its worth, expressed as "it satisfies me!" was inexcusable according to Menotti. He felt such indulgence held no place in art. It was no more than an "artistic apathy between composer and audience," an obstacle clearly in the way of the "shared meaning" of a work.<sup>37</sup>

Posturing like this on artistic matters was Menotti's way of addressing the elitist attitudes that permeated much of American opera in the 1940's, attitudes which served only to distance viewer from performer, relegating the former more to the role of passive observer than active participant; attitudes that prevailed at the Met, in fact. In an article which Menotti himself entitled, "Credo" (published in 1950 in The New York Times), Menotti posited that the composer's subjectivity should not outweigh nor exclude the crucial audience member; that to alienate one's audience was to fail one's artistic mission. He felt that alienation was all too pervasive in opera as it was. Declaring that "communication" was critical to the composer's art, he held that the failure to "communicate" had been the root cause for the decline in the modern theatre in general and of opera in particular.

To what degree Menotti's anti-elitist views colored his "Credo" is apparent in his remark that there was no room in "the creative process for elitist attitudes...[as they] excluded the public." <sup>38</sup> By this Menotti was reminding the Metropolitan Opera that dated

notions like Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* (the "integrated art work"), for example, were *passée*.<sup>39</sup> Menotti knew that it was a laborious task for the average viewer to understand precisely what Wagner had in mind in the integration of music with poetry, drama, and the visual arts. The length of Wagnerian opera coupled with the language barrier posed yet additional obstacles to its quick appreciation. In all, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* principle failed to hold up with the modern average opera-goer. Wagnerian opera lacked an immediacy of appeal with the greater public. It represented a clear example of Menotti's problem with the Metropolitan and the way in which the opera company catered to the so-called "privileged" attendee:

I firmly believe that art is...[the province] of humanity, not a specialized message to the "initiated few."<sup>40</sup>

It is worth observing that by raising issues like the notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Menotti was doing more than blaming the Met for its outmoded policies. Such issues ran counter to his concept of contemporary music in general. The failure of modern music to reach a wider audience, he contended, corresponded directly to the exclusiveness of the market which modern music sought to target. There was an imbalance in satisfying the select taste of the initiated "aficionado" alone. This only served to preclude the wider audience from appreciating it also. As far as he was concerned, there was no justifiable reason for modern music to assume such a posture. Doing so undermined the reciprocal relationship that yearned to exist between artist and audience. In the last analysis, both needed each other: whether admitted or not, the artist sought the esteem of his audience as much as his audience longed for his art.

Similarly, Menotti rejected all dogmatic Wagnerian *Zukunftsmusik*, or "music of the future," because it implied that elite

art is a kind of industry which produces bigger and better works with the progress of civilization...it would be impossible for any artist to write for something as inexplicit as the "future." 41

For the composer, "future music" amounted to an elusive and anomalous activity. He argued that

we actually have no guarantee that future audiences will be more understanding of or sensitive [toward modern writing] than they are today...the passage of time does not improve art, nor develop it. 42

Rather than "music of the future," Menotti preferred to believe that the music of the past owned a place in the present. Hence, such "trendiness" (intended to satisfy some "future" notion in music) played no role in the Menotti "Credo." As far as he was concerned, little was gained by

*chic-ness*, or the tendency of modern composers to...insist on being smartly and dissonantly in tune with the latest musical vogues... 43

By insisting that the music of the past, particularly the more theatrical late-nineteenth-century past, held more sway than any "future music," Menotti was demonstrating the importance of *sentimentalism* in his creative outlook. From the beginning, he saw no need to understate the theatrical aspect of his work. A dispute between Milhaud and Menotti over the latter's talent illustrates this fact. In condescension, Milhaud is said to have remarked that "Menotti is but a twentieth-century composer who writes bad nineteenth-century music," to which Menotti rejoined, "Milhaud is a nineteenth-century composer who writes bad twentieth-century music!" 44 More than just humorous, the remark is enlightening. If Menotti found fault with his contemporaries for their elitist views, it was because he indirectly defended his own sentimentalist side. What better *raison d'être* did theatre music have, after all, than eliciting an immediate, fundamental emotion? In this, he was of a mind

with Oscar Hammerstein, who remarked that "Life is sentimental." Menotti voiced his own conviction that

Sophistication per se is the antithesis of music...why not be sentimental sometimes? <sup>45</sup>

Closer inspection reveals that Menotti was in good company, for even Goethe maintained that "we must not disdain what is immediately sensuous."<sup>46</sup> The "sensuous" became analogous to the "sentimental," particularly in matters of the musical theatre. Music critic Winthrop Sargeant defended this in Menotti, remarking that the very thing that made

Menotti's operas stand out as little masterpieces [was]...this sentimentalist or human quality in his works. <sup>47</sup>

Virgil Thomson concurred with Sargeant in praising Menotti, extolling not the sentimental, exactly, but rather Menotti's "melodramatic vein," referring to it as one of the young composer's finer stylistic points. <sup>48</sup>

Menotti had reason to be guarded about his sentimentalism. In earlier years he had been swept up by "esoteric fads." As early as 1942, these elitist tendencies had found their way into his compositional style in The Island God, the second of his operas to premiere at the Met. Butler tells us that

Once Menotti himself ignored his guiding instinct -- in The Island God...here he wrote of exotic realms, priests, temples and remote though anguished love. That opera was his first and last genuine failure. <sup>49</sup>

The Island God was Menotti's earliest gesture at satisfying some illusory, stylistic trend, a historical one, and by most critical records he fell short of the mark. Worse yet, he alienated his audience. The lesson was an important one, for it taught Menotti what he later came to understand so well: that a story is best told when told honestly and intimately. <sup>50</sup>

The concept of telling a story honestly, described here as the intimacy factor, was one that his European contemporary, Felsenstein, also relished and worked to establish between performer and audience. Menotti was after the same ideal. He, too, recognized how central this idea was and regarded every detail of theatre as important, no matter how minute, from the visual to the musical.<sup>51</sup> Unquestionably, the idea proved useful in time. The clearest success of the intimate in Menotti's work was evident when he scaled-down, or miniaturized, his operas and introduced subtlety into his writing. This removed from his work much of

the old fashioned machinery of pomp and spectacle which most people associated with the idea of opera.<sup>52</sup>

This step was taken in 1946 in The Medium. The composer economized to the point of orchestrating The Medium for only twelve instruments. Ardoin points out that

before attempting to compose on so big a scale again, Menotti had to return to a more concentrated form of theatre...<sup>53</sup>

the kind of intimate element that had brought him earlier success with his radio opera, The Old Maid and the Thief (1939).

Unlike The Island God, The Medium drew one's attention to more than just the scaled-down nature of Menotti's style, it also emphasized the subjective in his work. For Menotti, this meant realistic acting. Felsenstein, too, had concerned himself with the subjective in the singer-actor. The German director had maintained that the performer was the axis around which all stage action revolved. His actors aimed at making roles believable; they strove to make characters "perceivable" to audiences; the viewer was made to believe a singer could communicate only through song. In all, subjective matters concerned Menotti as greatly as they did Felsenstein. Despite this, Menotti's brand of realistic acting was new to the Broadway musical of the time. It was certainly nowhere to be found in grand opera. With the exception of Britten's The Turn of the Screw<sup>54</sup> in

1954, few works of the time challenged the realist acting barrier. And yet, while both Britten and Menotti captured the mood of their respective stories (both works concerned themselves with the supernatural), Britten's adaptation of Henry James' novel was much too subtle to be effectively projected in the theatre.<sup>55</sup> Menotti's The Medium alone persuaded viewers via an intense level of realistic acting.

## Notes to Chapter Three:

- 1 Jacques Burdick, Theater (New York, 1972), p. 141.
- 2 Dietrich Steinbeck, "Walter Felsenstein" in The New Grove Dictionary of Music, vol. 5 (New York: Macmillan, 1980), p. 462.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 Walter Felsenstein, "The Road to improvement," Opera 21:1, January 1970, p. 8.
- 5 Felsenstein's influence extends not just to singers, but to directors as well, all formerly his students. Joachim Herz and Goetz Friedrich are such former protégés. Friedrich's own philosophy stressed that the stage is a poetically and aesthetically functional space which must include and embrace the audience.
- 6 This phrase gained currency in the 1950's. It specified the kind of acting commonly observed in opera, one devoid of the realist impulse.
- 7 Peter Paul Fuchs, ed., The Music Theater of Walter Felsenstein (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1975), p. xix.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. xiv.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. iv.
- 10 Paul Bekker, "The Opera Walks New Paths," Musical Quarterly 21, 1935, p. 278.
- 11 Robert Ackart, "Style All the While, But What Constitutes Style?" in Musical America 75. 15 February 1955, p. 22.
- 12 The larger implication reflects that Felsenstein's methodology adumbrated Menotti's own later work.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- 14 John Gruen, Menotti (New York: Macmillan, 1978), p. 25.
- 15 Judith Fryer, "Realism: a Major Factor in Menotti's Operatic Style," Opera Journal, 1974, p. 12.
- 16 Gruen, Menotti, p. 66.
- 17 J.M. Brown, "Seeing Things" in Saturday Review, 31 May 1947, p. 24.
- 18 Douglas Wyatt, Catholic World 165, June 1947, p. 266.
- 19 "Contralto on Broadway" in Time 49, 30 June 1947, p. 69.
- 20 Economic conditions reflect that in the 1940-41 season the Met saw financial losses of earned income just under \$51,000. For the following two seasons (up to 1943) it lost \$200,000 a season. In the 1943 season the Met lost \$110,000. Taxes and interest had wiped out operating profits. The reserve fund had to be replenished with a public appeal led by the Met Guild and drawing heavily from the radio audience. Martin Mayer, The Met: One Hundred Years of Grand Opera (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), p. 218.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 225.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 240.
- 23 "Opera in the Twentieth-Century: Naturalism" in The New Grove Dictionary of Music, vol. 13, p. 175.
- 24 Francis Robinson, Celebration: The Metropolitan Opera (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979), p. 54.
- 25 Mayer, The Met, p. 240.
- 26 Gruen, Menotti, p. 114.
- 27 N. Landsdale, "Menotti Calls the Met a Museum" in Theatre Arts 36, May 1952, p. 30.
- 28 *Ibid.*
- 29 Gian Carlo Menotti, "A Point of Contact" in Opera News, 27 December 1969.
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 Amelia at the Ball had been produced by the Curtis Institute at the Philadelphia Academy of Music in 1937. A year later the Met produced it.

- 32 "Unblessed by the Met" in Time, 20 May 1946, p. 54.
- 33 Gian Carlo Menotti, "From the Mail Pouch: Credo" in The New York Times, 2 November 1958, p. 49.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Edward Rothstein, "Sic Transit Goya" in The New Republic, 196:4, 26 January 1987, p. 28.
- 37 Menotti, "Credo," p. 49.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 For the better part of its inception in the nineteenth-century and again toward the end of the 1930's, the Metropolitan Opera had touted itself as a German house, proud both of its Wagnerian casts and its repertoire: "In 1938-39 the [Met's] regular season saw 41 performances of Wagner in a total... subscription season of 124 presentations, the highest proportion since 1890-91." Mayer, The Met, p. 199.
- 40 Gian Carlo Menotti, "Menotti -- Missionary Author" in The New York Times, 6 March 1955.
- 41 Menotti, "Credo," p. 49.
- 42 Gruen, Menotti, p. 118.
- 43 Malcolm Sargeant, "Wizard at the Opera" in Life, 1 May 1950, p. 92.
- 44 Gruen, Menotti, p. 60.
- 45 Sargeant, "Wizard of the Opera," p. 14.
- 46 Gian Carlo Menotti, "Notes on Opera as Basic Theatre" in Perspectives USA, 1955, p. 8.
- 47 Sargeant, "Wizard at the Opera," p. 14.
- 48 Brown, "Seeing Things," p. 22.
- 49 Henry Butler, "A Measure of Menotti" in Opera News, 8 February 1964, p. 27.
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 Ibid.
- 52 Sargeant, "Wizard of the Opera," p. 92.
- 53 John Ardoin, The Stages of Menotti (New York: Doubleday, 1985), p. 39.
- 54 Britten's opera, based on the Henry James story, also premiered much later, at New York's College of Music (Kaufmann Concert Hall) on March 19, 1958.
- 55 Donald Jay Grout, A Short History of Opera (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), p. 544.

## Chapter Four

### Outside Influences on American Musical Theatre

In many ways it can be said that Broadway in the 1930's and 1940's became the breeding ground for realistic opera in America. Broadway opera in all its disguises, as musical comedy, as the musical play, and as musical theatre, owed its vitality to forces that existed nowhere else at the time, not in movies, and not in radio, and later on in the 1950's, not in television. The Broadway opera of Menotti, furthermore, owed its emergence not to any single source, but to a number of sources. To greater or lesser degrees, influences that contributed toward the creation of Menotti's operas included:

- the Broadway musical play,
- realism in the plays of Arthur Miller,
- shock, mysticism, and Freudianism in the plays of Tennessee Williams,
- the *dream sequence* in the musicals of Rodgers and Weill and the plays of Miller,
- serious and violent elements in the Broadway musical,
- topical and contemporary settings derived from the repertory of Broadway works,
- language and its poetic handling as observed in Broadway plays, and
- the treatment of mood in the musicals of Kern and Hammerstein and others.

The influence of the Broadway musical play on Menotti was unique in that, unlike musical comedy which served to entertain rather than instruct, the musical play played down the gags and fun of the former. The musical play laid heavier emphasis on the story, allowing the music to be more organic to the play itself. Absent were the contrived boy meets girl situations, the happy endings, the spectacular production numbers.<sup>1</sup> It also strove to project dramatic truth and a certain insight into the makeup of characters. Furthermore, the musical play borrowed from the music of the show for the purpose of intensifying mood. <sup>2</sup> In this, Kurt Weill did a good deal to further the musical play by downplaying set numbers in the interest of integrating plot with music. <sup>3</sup>

The influence of the Broadway musical play on Menotti's The Medium is observed in the general "seriousness" of this opera. The story dealt with human cruelty. There

were no extraneous elements of plot, no songs inserted purely for vocal or musical display, no "arias" to halt the action. Everything served to advance the plot. The entertainment value of this work had its basis not in fun, but on the gruesome depiction of a realistic event. In this respect, the emphasis was entirely on the story. The music was utterly subjugated to it. Unlike the endings in musical comedy, the ending of The Medium was grim and foreboding. The dramatic truth behind the opera illuminated a struggle between the opposing ideas of faith and skepticism. Roles were convincing because the characters portrayed were believable. They were drawn from real life. All characters in The Medium moved with conviction and behaved as everyday human beings did, reacting to surroundings and to people around them. This had its effect on the mood of the opera. Mood enveloped everything: events, movement, even speech. The "dramatic musicals" of Kurt Weill, a contemporary of Menotti, drew on these qualities, especially his works, Lady in the Dark (1941) and Street Scene (1947). The tale of Street Scene was strong and evoked a marked somberness. It treated of life in a New York city tenement among those whose hopes and dreams were shattered: the poor, depressed, the frustrated. As in The Medium, murder was the climactic point of Street Scene. Like Menotti, Weill sought "to develop a musical theatre which could eventually grow into something like an American opera." <sup>4</sup>

Realism in Menotti emanated from many sources. The plays of Arthur Miller constituted one principal source. Both All My Sons (1947) and Death of a Salesman (1949) evinced a "poetic melodrama" <sup>5</sup> that influenced Menotti while he was working on his later two operas, The Consul and The Saint of Bleeker Street, in New York. Whereas Miller's works probed the social and psychological forces that destroy individuals, Menotti's The Consul probed the psychological forces that destroyed its own protagonist, Magda. Miller worked on intensifying the inner turmoil of his characters, Joe Keller and

Willy Loman. Their mental anguish was not unlike the subjective turmoil that consumed Magda in The Consul. An added similarity between Miller and Menotti was the way in which the viewer was brought into the character's point of view. Miller let his audience look at the world as Willy Loman did. One saw a glittering, shabby idealism. One saw, as Willy did, that sometimes all that was left of one's efforts were merely broken dreams and a host of unanswered questions about success. Magda was tyrannized by a different sort of failure, but one not any less real. Menotti, too, was able to bring the audience around to Magda's point of view: Magda's world was anxious, brutal. Unanswered questions over freedom and her husband's whereabouts left the viewer with the same stomach-wrenching emptiness that Miller evoked in his plays. The parallel between Miller and Menotti was further intensified by the suicide that took place at the conclusion of The Consul.

The element of shock one observed in the plays of Tennessee Williams was present in Menotti's operas as well. The women in Williams' plays, Glass Menagerie and A Streetcar Named Desire, were placed in desperate situations intended to mildly shock the audience. Such situations led one to believe that, when carried to extremes, such outcomes were possible in one's own life. In Menotti, shock manifested itself more overtly. Toby's murder in The Medium, the death of the Sorel baby in The Consul, and Michele's murder of Desideria in The Saint of Bleecker Street were all shock-provoking events. What is more, the women in Williams' plays (Laura in Menagerie and Blanche in Streetcar) were frail and enmeshed in psychological worlds of their own creation from which no escape was possible. And there was also something quasi-mystical about them. Menotti's women (Baba in The Medium and Annina in The Saint) tended to be equally frail psychologically. Baba was the mental victim of her self-made fears and Annina lived in a mystical world so believable that everyone around her fed her reality. They worshipped

what her reality stood for. The ability of Williams to treat his topics with frankness and candor was apparent in Menotti, too. The candor in Menotti, however, depicted highly selective kinds of topics. His themes sprang from his culture, his Italian background. They dealt with the mystical (The Medium), the search for religious absolutism (The Saint), the disruption of the family unit (The Consul) and the balancing of an ethnic duality (The Saint).

Menotti's ability to portray character with exceeding honesty was juxtaposed against the portrayal of characters in the plays of Eugene O'Neill. While characters and situations in both Menotti and O'Neill were genuinely portrayed (however sordidly), Menotti's characters went beyond realism, often into the realm of the surreal and the mystical. O'Neill's characters, on the other hand, managed to retain both their honesty and their believability.

A dramatic device that found currency during Menotti's time on Broadway was the *dream sequence*. This dramatic device had its expression in a number of works. The *dream sequence* in Weill's Lady in the Dark (1941) revolved around the theme of the play, which was psycho-analysis. The heroine went from the realistic world of her business and love life to the unreal world of her fretful dreams and to recollections of her childhood. In Death of a Salesman, the *dream sequence* took on a symbolic aspect. The symbol of Willy Loman's unattained success assumed the form of his dead brother who told him at the end of the play to take his life as a way of atoning for his failures. In Tennessee Williams' Rose Tattoo (1951), a woman mourned her dead husband to such a point that she lived in a self-created dream world. In Rodgers and Hammerstein's Oklahoma (1941), the *dream sequence* was the ballet entitled, "Laurie Makes Up Her Mind." Agnes de Mille's choreography of this *dream sequence* ballet justified one of the most tenuous psychological points in Oklahoma: it explained the reason why Laurie is

unable to go to the dance with Curly. In Menotti's The Consul, the *dream sequence* came at the end of the opera, when Magda turned on the gas, preparing to commit suicide. In a semi-conscious state, Magda had visions of the people she had just been with in the office of the Consul.

Violence in Menotti opera had links with innovations that took place in the Broadway musical play of the 1940's. At the hands of Rodgers and Hammerstein, the musical play turned both serious and brutal. Carousel (1945), for example, broke a long-standing tradition on Broadway: the show ended with the male principal already dead. Billy Bigelow had died midway through the play. Weill's musical play, Street Scene, also exemplified a similar somberness. As a matter of fact, murder and death in the Broadway musical were observed earlier, as early as 1935, in Gershwin's Porgy and Bess, a work in which Porgy kills Crown. Six years later, similar violence-related events reappeared in Rodgers' Oklahoma; here Curly kills Jud. It went against the escapist tradition of the musical to have murder as a part of the musical-dramatic action.<sup>6</sup> Similar conventions were broken as early as 1927 by Jerome Kern. The introduction of a serious topic such as interracial marriage, a major part of the theme of Showboat (1927), was the sort of thing not customarily treated onstage. Such topics were taboo. Interracial taboos were shattered even further in 1949 in Rodgers' and Hammerstein's South Pacific. This successful musical broached the question of racial discrimination. It also raised a major issue regarding love: was it really the sole preserve of the young? The musical demonstrated that it was not. Dramatic gestures such as these verged on naturalism, and they, too, found their way into Menotti's works.

The contemporary setting in Menotti was derived from the realistic style and from the tendency on the part of contemporary playwrights and composers to portray

age-old dilemmas in modern terms. The work of Williams, Inge, Miller, O'Neill, Blitzstein, Weill, Rodgers and others inclined toward contemporary depictions of life. In addition, Menotti drew exceedingly upon his experiences in America, experiences which were quite new and personal, as the source for his operas of The Medium and The Saint of Bleeker Street.

There were a number of musical works that had played on Broadway that encouraged Menotti's use of the topical, the modern, and the contemporary. Lady in the Dark (Weill and Gershwin), The Cradle Will Rock (Blitzstein), Pal Joey (Rodgers and Hart), Oklahoma (Rodgers and Hammerstein), Street Scene (Weill and Rice) and Down in the Valley (Weill and Sundgaard), Regina (Blitzstein), On the Town (Bernstein, Comden and Green), even ballets such as Age of Anxiety (based on Auden's play) and Facsimile (both works by Bernstein), all served as models for the modern, topical settings of Menotti's operas.

The Consul, for example, owed its success to the topical nature of the story, to the time in which it was set. The opera brought home the Cold War in all its brutality. Its tale of tyranny was told in the modern language of outrage. Audiences related to it strongly. It reminded many of those in Europe who were desperately trying to obtain visas in order to start new lives in the free world. While he did not specify where the opera is set, Menotti did indicate that the locale was "somewhere in Europe." This gesture made the opera relevant, gave it a universality. Set at a time when America was vaunting its own political temper, in the blacklistings of the 1950's, McCarthyism, and the red scare, The Consul awakened the viewer to the realities of the day, particularly to the needs of war-torn Europe. Many saw it as a plea for human compassion, the composer's personal outcry against inhumanity.

The use of language in the Broadway musical of the 1940's served to elevate the form. Innovations in language constituted an influence on Menotti, too. Marc Blitzstein's able handling of language helped him to adapt Weill's version (Three Penny Opera) of Gay's The Beggar's Opera into modern English. Blitzstein's contributions to the stage (Regina) and to contemporary writing (he wrote for the leading musical periodical of the day, *Modern Music*), honed his concise language style. Gertrude Stein, too, advanced the use of language for the theatre as companion to Virgil Thomson's music. Thomson's music merged with Gertrude Stein's words in The Mother of Us All (1947). The work constituted a major leap forward for the use of language in opera. This production followed up a previous success in 1934 of Four Saints in Three Acts. Thomson's musico-textual setting, highly unpredictable, amusing and irreverent, had not yet been heard in American opera. Thomson's

American English *recitative* created a usable musical speech...in narrative dialogue and in lyric excursions in which every syllable was intelligible.<sup>7</sup>

Menotti possessed superb librettistic skills himself. His style was thoroughly unlike Thomson's and quite akin to Blitzstein's. Menotti's vocabulary was drawn from Italian opera and showed an inclination toward poetic simplicity. One could see this, Gruen said, even in the manner in which Menotti absorbed English upon his arrival in America. Such simplicity found its voice in Menotti's poetry, in his short stories, his essays and in his plays. A desire to express himself clearly and simply led him to write his own libretti. Menotti's first major effort at an English libretto was for The Old Maid and the Thief. Admittedly, he conceded, "The Old Maid contains some very curious sentences... Samuel Barber read it for the first time and made fun of my English."<sup>8</sup> In The Medium, the composer let the music dictate the contours of the libretto: "I sing my words as I write them,"<sup>9</sup> Menotti said. His down-to-earth dialogue came out of the

musicals of the time. In a similar way, simple dialogue had been key to the success of Hammerstein's Oklahoma. Gerald Bordman described Hammerstein's use of language in his adaptation of Lynn Riggs' play, Green Grow The Lilacs, as "affecting in its simplicity." <sup>10</sup>

The *mood* of the Broadway musical, underway at the time, by way of its innovations, affected Menotti as well. In this, Jerome Kern's and Oscar Hammerstein's Showboat (1927) was a pioneer work. It pointed the way to such later musicals as Oklahoma,<sup>11</sup> which itself set the vogue throughout the 1940's and early 1950's for the structure of the musical play.<sup>12</sup> Richard Rodgers saw the possibility of setting the mood of the musical play with the opening number. At the heart of this innovation in mood was also a sentimental return to bygone America. Rodgers admitted that he violated the first cardinal rule of Broadway in Oklahoma by refusing to begin the show with a chorus number. In his own words,

Obviously, a show about farmers and cowboys would open with a barn dance ...[but] it didn't feel right...[Lynn Riggs' play reveals a] woman churning butter, alone, in the middle of the stage. And Curly's voice was heard in the distance, gradually coming closer.<sup>13</sup>

Mood-setting such as this influenced other Broadway composers like Leonard Bernstein. Where in earlier times Bernstein's musical of On the Town might have led off with a dozen sailors dancing on the deck of their ship, it opened instead with a lonely sailor singing on a dark dockside set.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Brevity Factor in Verismo**

Menotti's The Medium owed a debt to the one-act format of Mascagni's and Puccini's Cavalleria Rusticana and Il Tabarro as well as to Leoncavallo's brief two-act

structure of Pagliacci. The concise format of *verismo* meant that the action was concentrated in a way that lent force to the impact of the opera as a whole. The viewer was usually assailed with a wave of melodramatic surprises or a series of highly intense moments resembling buildups of tension followed by predictable release. It is noteworthy that the same device of tension and release had long been in use in Verdian opera. An example from Rigoletto illustrates this point. All throughout Act one/scene two of Verdi's opera the viewer observes the alternating of conditions:

- Rigoletto is troubled by Monterone's curse; on his way home he is accosted by an assassin who offers the jester his services (tension)
- Rigoletto muses on the comparative similarity between his profession (jester) and that of Sparafucile (assassin) (release)
- The strain of a secretive life with his daughter is made clear to the audience; Rigoletto orders all doors locked as he leaves home following duet with Gilda (tension)
- The Duke bribes the nurse, slips into the garden; the ensuing duet and Gilda's aria demonstrate the mood is tranquil (or at least static) once again (release)
- The abduction of Gilda by the Duke's courtiers followed by Rigoletto's discovery of it intensifies events all over again (tension)

Even though Verdi measurably drew out the scene, the alternation between dramatic tension and relief was unmistakable.

The *veristi* imitated Verdi by taking points of high dramatic intensity and gathering them in a similar manner, but the time factor was condensed to a great degree. Most dramatic moments in Verdi usually peaked as displays of vocal ecstasy or intense passion conveyed through the music. In *verismo*, these same climaxes took the form of melodramatic shocks that assailed the viewer one after the other.

### **The Brevity Factor in Neo-Verismo and the Musical Play**

The Medium was the product of Menotti's decision to focus on "a more concentrated form of theatre" than the one observed in opera up to that time (the mid-1940's). This concentration in Menotti's melodramatic work represented a look

backward to the *veristic* model of the late-nineteenth-century. The practice of condensing events, of bringing them to a fast and furious conclusion as he did in The Medium, was altogether new to the form. It was certainly new to the musical of the 1940's. <sup>15</sup> In this regard, Menotti increasingly bent his efforts toward creating a type of work that the new public of his day was ready for.

Broadway opera became the close cousin of the Broadway musical play of the time. The Medium bridged the gap between the purely operatic work, one that was sung throughout with little or no dialogue, and such musical plays of the time as Pal Joey, Oklahoma, and Carousel. Broadway opera's initial appearances in the late 1930's was soon followed by works which recurrently made use of the form. By the 1950's, one noticed that the distinction was routinely becoming blurred between the musical play and Broadway opera. Marc Blitzstein, for example, originally envisioned his Regina (1949) as a musical play, but in no time at all it had become identified as an opera with spoken dialogue. <sup>16</sup> Similar distortions between the musical play and opera occurred when critics referred to certain works as *folk plays* with music, as they did in the case of Weill's Street Scene (1947). In a similar manner, New York Times critic Harold Schonberg went on record in referring to Menotti's The Consul as a musical play. <sup>17</sup> In all, misnomers and indiscriminate attributions such as these served to blur whatever distinctions there were to be seen in the forms.

By the late 1950's and early 1960's the merger between Broadway opera and the musical play evolved to such a degree that it assumed the label of musical theatre. The attribution surfaced when producers and critics began objecting to the rising cost of producing traditional grand opera, roughly in the early 1960's. Musical theatre acquired identifiable features that distinguished it quite clearly from all else at the time. Gershwin's Porgy and Bess serves as an example of musical theatre, even though no such

attribution was ever linked to this work. Menotti's output similarly qualified as musical theatre. Eventually, the term *musical theatre* took on a character all its own. Although critics dismissed it at first as a trivialization of grand opera, inevitably they, too, embraced the concept, deeming it worthy of serious consideration as a valid part of the contemporary musical language.<sup>18</sup> In a three-part definition, Andrew Porter provided a concise description of musical theatre. He said that musical theatre referred to a small musical work that involved a dramatic element in its presentation, as in a chamber opera.<sup>19</sup>

One can say that *neo-verismo* is exemplified in Menotti's The Medium because it had all the identifying features above: its dimensions were small, it made use of an intense dramatic element, and it described a type of performance in which acting was starkly realistic. The fact that it played on Broadway brought it into the arena of the musical play of the time. It exhibited a particular appeal that sprang from its concise format, one in which brevity had an essential position in The Medium. To a certain degree, a concentration of the dramatic action was a vital part of Menotti's The Consul and The Saint of Bleecker Street, too. Without question, all these works were infused with melodrama. They were fundamentally lean and carried a dramatic impact partly because the composer, the librettist, and the director were all one in each case. Like *verismo*, the closing scenes tended to be emotionally charged. These considerations, therefore, serve as the basis for this writer's contention that Menotti's style constituted a recurrent strain of *verismo* -- referred to here as *neo-verismo*.

### **Contemporary Forms of Broadway Opera**

In the propitious postwar climate of Broadway, the musical theatre works of Gian Carlo Menotti, and The Medium in particular in 1947, awakened contemporary audiences to the potential of realism in opera.<sup>20</sup> While The Medium set a few precedents,

the arrival of opera to Broadway was not new. Contemporary composers had already offered American opera to the Broadway public. In 1936, Mark Blitzstein had produced The Cradle Will Rock; Virgil Thomson had offered Four Saints in Three Acts in 1934 (his The Mother of Us All premiered only six days after Menotti's The Medium in 1947); and Kurt Weill followed up his Street Scene in January of 1947 with Down in the Valley a year later. All these works saw their premieres either on or off-Broadway.

Broadway opera was not immune to the prevailing mystique fostered by the privileged few at the Met. The Broadway form also brought with it a certain artistic high-mindedness of its own. There were composers such as Weill and Blitzstein who were eager to propound their personal theories regarding the developing ideology of the musical theatre of the time. And while they all sought essentially the same thing (a successful Broadway run), for many, the best of artistic intentions was always the last reason that won over the public. Richard Rodgers, for instance, was no idealist. He told Time magazine in 1938 that "what was killing musical comedy was its sameness, its tameness."<sup>21</sup> Rodgers set about revolutionizing the musical by imbuing it with socially conscious commentary. His shows, Pal Joey, Carousel and South Pacific exemplified this quality. Rodgers trusted his theatrical instincts and blended risky commentary with the theatre's conventional traditions. Virgil Thomson's alliance with Gertrude Stein in Four Saints in Three Acts, on the other hand, provoked curious attention in the press and amused others, but all this was insufficient to insure a lasting place for Thomson's work in the repertoire, even in spite of pronouncements that it was vocally beautiful.<sup>22</sup> Taken together, the idealism of composers like Thomson and others sounded a familiar concern. It asked: where was the one true American opera? The thrust of these interrogatories inspired Menotti's contemporaries, and Menotti himself, to yearn "to compose solid,

serious works which would lay the foundations for a national opera." <sup>23</sup> Despite efforts to this end, however, Broadway opera was

criticized as being "too derivative" of European models...it lacked the melodic inventiveness, spirit and distinctively American character of the best musical comedies.<sup>24</sup>

Still, the conducive artistic climate of Broadway did not prevent Menotti's contemporaries from experimenting with the form. While some tried their hand at innovating the musical, virtually all bent their efforts toward creating works for a new public, and the way that each composer adapted himself to this end was distinct. In 1927, Kern and Hammerstein, for instance, had broken with one of the Aristotelian unities (time) by placing Showboat in four different time frames: 1888, 1893 (at the Chicago World's Fair), 1894, and 1927. Later in 1941, Richard Rodgers rejected wit for sincerity and directness. <sup>25</sup> In its place, one observed a theme in Oklahoma that was altogether new. The theme had a flavor that infected people. Hammerstein identified this flavor as gaiety, youth, and a general heartiness in life. Rodgers experimented with pre-writing melodies before setting them to Hammerstein's lyrics. <sup>26</sup> As innovative as this was, he knew what audiences wanted and he continued to strive for true, good melodies. More importantly, his tunes retained the sentiment the public favored. Sometimes Rodgers' experimentation was bold. There were songs in Carousel, for instance, that resembled operatic arias in their expansiveness. Observe Billy Bigelow's *Soliloquy*. And there were Robert Russell Bennett's orchestrations which made use of a typical Broadway style. Innovations such as the employment of continuous textures <sup>27</sup> in songs set the musicals of Rodgers apart from all the others. They markedly broke with the past in this respect. Indeed, it prompted Gerald Bordman to point out that whatever praise Rodgers and Hammerstein received tended to concentrate on the changes that made their shows unique more than on anything else. <sup>28</sup>

Kurt Weill, on the other hand, had fled prewar Germany in 1935, arrived in America and acclimated himself right away to American culture. He immediately went about creating a career on Broadway. His style was driven by a "mission." He had a point to make. The German composer related his belief on American musical theatre this way:

I became convinced of the possibility to develop a musical theatre which could eventually grow into something like an American opera, but at the same time I made up my mind that such development could only take place on Broadway because Broadway represents the living theatre in this country and American opera should be a part of the living theatre. <sup>29</sup>

Innovation was to be observed in Weill's jittery, abbreviated musical lines and startling non-commercial harmonies, especially in his opera, Street Scene. In Cradle Will Rock, Blitzstein showed boldness and innovation of his own. Some years before, Blitzstein had analyzed the relationship of music theatre to the social conditions of the day. His exposure to the philosophy of Hanns Eisler at New York's New School for Social Research had made a lasting impression on him. Eisler's revolutionary approach prevented Blitzstein from even thinking "about music without analyzing its relationship to the social condition of the day." <sup>30</sup> Quite the pragmatist, Blitzstein used whatever style, medium or method he felt necessary to accomplish his extramusical goals: <sup>31</sup> he adopted dissonance, American jazz rhythms, blues song forms, speech patter, aria, arioso -- whatever worked. His *agit-prop* opera, The Cradle Will Rock, was the product of this pragmatism. In all, the force of social themes permeated his work. In his hands, the *agit-prop* vehicle was evidential of the contemporary theatre's drive toward realism. Still, as important as this was, the socialist impulse was but only one aspect of the innovative trend on Broadway.

A more obvious trait of the changing musical theatre was the notion of *integration* of music and drama. Musicals which contained stories that contributed to the action by creating mood, revealing character or advancing the plot by way of the music were

referred to as *integrated* works.<sup>32</sup> Kurt Weill had created this kind of entertainment in Weimar Berlin years earlier. In Europe his works had been labeled *dramatic musicals*. Weill described the idea of *integration* as

a simple yet strong story told in musical terms interweaving the spoken word and the sung word so that the singing took over whenever the emotion of the spoken word reached a point where the music could speak with greater effect.<sup>33</sup>

Realist ideas like these mirrored the theatrical principles of Felsenstein in prewar Germany. They affirmed the connection between performer and audience that Felsenstein believed in, and the contention that the singer should strive to convince the audience that his part could be communicated only through song.

In *The Cradle Will Rock* (which Blitzstein dedicated to Brecht), popular music became *integrated* with the mixed ethnic speech of the city and a politically left-wing viewpoint. Critics called it the most appealing operatic socialism since Charpentier's *Louise*.<sup>34</sup> Kern's *Showboat* similarly advanced the plot by way of the music. Here the songs and production numbers were used only when the plot demanded them. Kern's work had a logical story, too, and a host of arresting characters, all of which served the play.

But it was in *Oklahoma* that the term *integrated* gained its currency and respectability. *Oklahoma* was unlike anything Broadway had seen before. It was done differently: every song told part of the story, every dance advanced the action. Agnes de Mille devised it so that even the ballet became an integral part of the entertainment rather than the usual interpolation.<sup>35</sup> Rouben Mamoullian, the director of the Broadway *Oklahoma*, characterized succinctly his notion of the *integrated* musical:

Every element that goes on the stage should serve one purpose: and that is...improving the dramatic action, improving characters, improving the atmosphere. Whether it is set, costumes, colors, dialogue, song, music or recitative -- it all should serve that purpose. It should be all *integrated* so that one is not conscious...of a specialty song or a specialty dance. There are no specialty numbers in Oklahoma...It was a conscious development. You never knew when dialogue would turn into a song, or when dramatic action would become a dance. <sup>36</sup>

Once the press got hold of it, the term *integrated* snowballed in popularity. The New York Times called Oklahoma

wonderful...[it] combined a fresh gaiety, a charm of manner, beautiful acting, singing and dancing...Seldom has a [musical] score been so well *integrated*...no number in the score was out of place... <sup>37</sup> [italics mine]

The prevalence of this aesthetic even had its effect on the Metropolitan Opera. The burgeoning popularity of Broadway prompted Rudolf Bing, upon his arrival at the Met in 1950 as general manager, to announce that he had an interest in bringing an *integrated* performance concept to the opera company.

The comments of the press varied depending on the relative difference that musicals made on Broadway in the 1940's. Differences were gauged in a number of ways: artistically, musically and monetarily. Praise for Blitzstein's The Cradle Will Rock, for instance, ran along artistic lines. Brooks Atkinson remarked that Blitzstein's opera was "the most politically insurgent " work of its kind on the Broadway stage. <sup>38</sup> Not at all sure of the artistic makeup of Oklahoma, critics asked, "what is it?" <sup>39</sup> Still, this did not change the fact that critics were unanimous in their vote that Oklahoma was the musical standout of the early 1940's. Lewis Nichols referred to its music simply as "easy," <sup>40</sup> while Howard Barnes in the New York Herald Tribune labeled it "superb." One very popular response to Oklahoma was that the show was not "commercial" enough; it didn't have girls coming out in small amounts of clothing. It prompted Agnes de Mille to recall that she told Hammerstein -- "there's no sex in this show!" <sup>41</sup>

While it is true that to varying degrees virtually all these musical theatre works found some sort of receptive Broadway audience, only Gershwin's Porgy and Bess in 1935 enjoyed relatively better success. Gershwin's opera owed much of its success to the quality of Dubose Heyward's play, which years earlier had made its own mark and had earned the Pulitzer Prize for Heyward. It also owed a great deal to the way in which Gershwin's operatic pieces replaced the occasional spirituals which had been sung during the course of the play. Preserving the essential mood of the work made the opera highly appealing in idiom and in style. Of all the early composers of Broadway opera -- Kern, Blitzstein and Rodgers -- Gershwin manifested one of the most clearly developed ideas about the form. Indeed, audiences eagerly looked for a work like Porgy and Bess.

Notwithstanding its premiere on Broadway, rather than at the Met, Gershwin himself considered Porgy and Bess an opera. That the Met had reservations about sponsoring its premiere only shows that Porgy had no proven history as a successful work. Its Broadway premiere, above all, reflected the work's link to the popular stage and to the musical comedy of the time.<sup>42</sup> In the Metropolitan's view this made Porgy commercially unlucrative. All told, Gatti-Casazza and Witherspoon saw it as a bad risk. The point was a telling one and it argued on behalf of Menotti's own later problem with the Met and its so-called "museum" policy of only mounting works which were deemed grand enough. It became increasingly obvious that the Met sought tried, true, but mostly *lucrative* works. It was issues like these that way-laid the permanent entry of Porgy and Bess into the American operatic repertory. In spite of it, however, by the end of the 1940's Gershwin's opera had purportedly achieved on Broadway what Blitzstein, Weill and the others had failed at: Porgy had assumed the label of the "true American opera."<sup>43</sup>

Critic Olin Downes foretold that the preponderance of songs in Porgy would do no more than reap generous returns for Gershwin,<sup>44</sup> and he was right to an extent. But

Gershwin did manage to convince some of his critics, for there were those who roundly approved of Porgy, according it the status of *music drama*.<sup>45</sup> Clearly, they said, Porgy was an entertainment event, but "entertainment in its larger meaning."<sup>46</sup> The highest compliment probably came from critic Brooks Atkinson, who called Gershwin the "spokesman for the dramatic idea."<sup>47</sup> Dissenting notices ran the gamut from kind to those verging on invective. Critics like Lawrence Gilman said that the "succession of song hits blemished the opera's musical integrity,"<sup>48</sup> while still others scathingly referred to Porgy as a "hybrid" work in which a Tin Pan Alley composer had just "overreached himself."<sup>49</sup> In most cases, critics were not sure what they were seeing, an operatic work or musical comedy. What they did agree on was that it lay somewhere in between the two.<sup>50</sup> It seemed, however, that critics of the time were unaware of the fact that Porgy's fleeting but noteworthy success would serve to enhance the position of The Medium later on in 1947.

### **Menotti and Broadway Opera**

Gerald Bordman tells us that the early 1940's found most young talent either in Hollywood or fighting the war.<sup>51</sup> In point of fact, George Gershwin, Marc Blitzstein, Kurt Weill, and Gian Carlo Menotti were the focus of the new movement.<sup>52</sup>

Like his contemporaries, Menotti was looking to further his own success after Amelia at the Ball (1937), The Old Maid and the Thief (1939), and The Island God (1942). Like the others, he, too, had distinct ideas about the furthering of his career. His ambitions allowed him to model the success of Rodgers and Hammerstein and thereby break the mold of dramatic expectation associated with more traditional opera. It was evident that after his grim experience with The Island God, further opportunities at the Metropolitan Opera were not likely, not for a while, at least. The more inviting venue of Broadway beckoned. Up to now, the closest Menotti had come to working on Broadway had

been his Curtis Institute production of Amelia and the Radio City Music Hall broadcast of The Old Maid and the Thief.<sup>53</sup> The thrust of his artistic inclinations up to this point, however, showed that the Broadway stage was just right for what he had to offer. Also, the fact that the economic times looked hopeful once again helped exceedingly. With The Medium, Menotti bridged an otherwise unbridgeable gap between opera and the popular theatre.<sup>54</sup> He offered Broadway audiences something they had not seen in years, not since David Belasco. Melodrama became the essential selling point of The Medium, The Consul and The Saint of Bleecker Street.

Why Menotti chose Broadway was summed up in a comment by his former secretary, Francis Rizzo:

He was looking for a wider, more spontaneous public -- [for] those who, like children, go to the theatre with open eyes and ears and hearts...and he was willing to go everywhere and anywhere to find that public.<sup>55</sup>

Menotti himself confessed that Broadway held a certain appeal. He wanted to prove that opera could find a new audience and even pay for itself, not depend on subsidization.<sup>56</sup>

In Menotti's words,

I simply wanted to experiment and see if operas could be taken out of the opera house and run the way plays run -- with consecutive performances -- and be accepted by a so-called non operatic audience.<sup>57</sup>

He further questioned the production policies of the Metropolitan Opera by saying,

I also rebelled against the repertory system because of its seemingly indestructible tradition of presenting a daily change of fare, which necessitates changes in cast, encourages inexactitudes in lighting and staging, and therefore is never able to preserve the image and sounds of the original production.<sup>58</sup>

His experiences on Broadway were later to prove that his instincts were right: he admitted to the enjoyment of working on Broadway, where "the producers let me do what I want."<sup>59</sup> He knew freedom and license were essential to his artistic fulfillment. He

knew, too, that Broadway was the place where his particular type of operatic writing would find a receptive audience, one that existed nowhere else at the time. Broadway epitomized the alternative to the Met. It was the place where Menotti's special brand of melodrama could live out its popularity, where it could find its most receptive public.

Urbane, confident, bustling, a man in "constant dramatic suspense about himself,"<sup>60</sup> Menotti epitomized the 1940's Broadway composer. His thorough understanding of the theatre's requirements made him the total man-of-theatre even in his early years. He, too, wrote with the stage in mind,<sup>61</sup> in much the same way as Puccini had half a century earlier. The stage constituted a share of Menotti's fulfillment. He recognized that working on Broadway would allow him to write his own libretti, serve as his own casting director, stage director and generally permit him to be involved in all phases of production. He knew that on Broadway he could command a larger, more varied audience than had been possible at the Metropolitan. Donald Jay Grout considered Menotti's consistent and sincere attempt to reach the larger public a testimonial to the continuing validity of a long and respectable operatic tradition.<sup>62</sup>

Menotti's The Medium represented the next step in the evolving trend toward twentieth-century realistic opera. But although the work commanded considerable artistic attention, the longer-term question as to whether Menotti's work marked any sort of historic operatic milestone, especially in the view of critics, remained unanswered. It was obvious to most that The Medium's attraction via its shocking thriller effects, its distinctive type of acting, its engaging use of simple yet poetic language, its occult theme, its brevity, and a host of musical devices that underscored the opera's dramatic high points -- all these characteristics looked back to a turn-of-the-century *verismo* typical of Puccini, Mascagni, Leoncavallo, and others. It is also true that traces of these stylistic features were to be readily found in the works of any one of

Menotti's contemporaries, including Weill (Street Scene), Blitzstein (Cradle Will Rock), Gershwin (Porgy and Bess), even Benjamin Britten (Peter Grimes). Nevertheless, it became apparent that while the general trend toward Broadway opera in the 1940's saw a number of competitors, not all were able to match Menotti's uncanny ability to bring together the entire weave of this musico-theatrical fabric. In this Menotti stood apart. His "thorough understanding...of the theatre" <sup>63</sup> almost guaranteed him a unique success. His opera of The Medium was thoroughly operatic. It never straddled the fence stylistically as Gershwin's or Blitzstein's works did between opera and the musical play. Thomson corroborated this fact by referring to The Medium as "an operatic narrative." <sup>64</sup> At the same time, its realism never challenged the belief of audiences. It seemed natural, inevitable. <sup>65</sup> It evinced an innovative streak as striking as Rodgers' Oklahoma in terms of its originality, and an *integrated* cohesiveness as marked as Kern's Showboat or Weill's Street Scene. Menotti's expert venture into musical theatre <sup>66</sup> thus became the watershed for the evolving form of musical theatre of the time.

#### **Assessment: The Appeal of Menottian Opera**

The immense success of Menotti's operas has been contingent on their appeal to a mass audience. The fact that The Medium has maintained a continuing place as one of the ten most-performed operas of the contemporary repertoire attests to its long-standing and extensive popularity. Following the premiere of The Medium <sup>67</sup> in 1947, Virgil Thomson foretold of its felicitous future by commenting that "the whole work was destined for a long and successful career." Over forty years and close to 3,500 performances later, <sup>68</sup> Thomson's forecast has seen its complete fulfillment.

The extraordinary success of The Medium and The Consul, especially, has been due to Menotti's uncanny ability to gauge his audiences. The particular audience appeal

these works have had is attributable to three factors: melodrama, sentimentalism and believability. The mercurial response of audiences to these factors has assured a lasting place for The Medium, The Consul, and to a lesser degree, The Saint of Bleeker Street in the contemporary repertoire. Menotti's ability to appeal to the many rather than to the cultured few grew out of a keen understanding of what it took to attract a Broadway audience. Understanding what link these works had with the various manifestations of the popular stage of the time, or in the Hollywood movie, for instance, is critical to an appreciation of Menotti's ability.

Whereas certain contemporary works of period like The Cradle Will Rock preferred to appeal to national consciousness, The Medium chose instead to restore impassioned melodrama to the stage. From the very beginning, it was evident that melodrama had been an essential part of Menotti's innate nature. His earliest work, The Death of Pierrot (opus #1), was an opera he had set to his own words. It already had glimmerings of what was to become his later style: it ended with the entire cast dispatched by suicide and murder. This testified to a flair for the dramatic that never left Menotti.<sup>69</sup> By the time he wrote The Medium, the melodramatic impulse had developed. It now revealed itself in the form of clever timing and a flair for stage effect. In this opera the audience witnessed a "first rate flagellation,"<sup>70</sup> an eerie seance and a ghostly murder. In The Consul, the brutality of the Cold War of the early 1950's was brought home. Its story was that of topical melodrama. The shattering of a windowpane, hypnotism and *legerdemain* were its ingredients. In The Saint of Bleeker Street, Menotti engaged his audience in the counterpulls of piety and sensual love, violence and conviviality.<sup>71</sup> In each case, the music was the underscoring element of the drama. Conflicts and emotions were exaggerated. All these distinctions were then couched in

sensational, highly emotional utterance for the purpose of heightening the theatrical effect.

The element of sentimentality prevailed in Menotti because he set no limits on the theatrical aspect of his work. In this regard he exhibited a daring but sincere side to his compositional style. His success, in part, grew out of this ability to dare to say what he really meant, theatrically. A composer's skill, he believed, was measured by his ability to make even the most daring, the sentimental, in this case, seem inevitable.<sup>72</sup> He was not afraid to give life to tragedy in the form of pity and fear in The Medium, nor to show what suffering revealed about his characters in The Consul and The Saint of Bleeker Street. By extension, the sentimental evoked the inner personality of the dramatic situation through Menotti's music. One can say the sentimental worked subliminally through the music to explain more deeply what his characters felt. This, in turn, dictated what they were compelled to sing. In the end, the resulting balance between music and emotion validated the notion of sentiment in his work, legitimized it, and raised it to the level of artistic acceptance.

One of the more forceful elements in Menotti's charisma with audiences was believability. It became the most demonstrable of Menotti's many contributions to the advancement of a realist ethic in theatre, vis-a-vis the Broadway musical form. Throughout the 1930's and 1940's musical shows had come to demand more than a convincing plot, an effective dramatic situation or characters made of flesh and blood to make them plausible. All these elements needed to coalesce with regard to music, period setting (the stage picture), and the behavior of the characters and the action (or the plot). Menotti helped to synthesize this musico-dramatic merger and to establish these elements as important requisites of Broadway opera.<sup>73</sup>

The profile of the attendee at a Broadway opera was that of a viewer who had little tolerance for fat, formal singers emitting "whoops" as they did on the stage of the Metropolitan Opera. The public who turned to Broadway opera wanted to see performers who were visually credible, who really addressed each other rather than walked downstage center away from everyone about them. There was a call for characters who were recognizable, who were not separated from everyday life by high birth, foreign title or mysterious circumstances. <sup>74</sup> In some respects, the public looked for characters who were American.<sup>75</sup> Characters such as those in Carousel, for example, represented a clear leap forward. They had humanity. Billy Bigelow in his Soliloquy voiced what countless fathers-to-be had often thought about. In Oklahoma, the dancers emerged as real people, warm and believable. In short, Broadway audiences wanted to see people whom they could relate to, empathize with. Early in his career, Rodgers (and Gershwin as well) had learned what it took to supply this. In his own early years, Menotti, too, came to recognize what audiences looked for. His three operas treated real, contemporary situations; they presented characters who were quickly recognizable to the viewer. His stage direction strove for the fluid, the fast-paced, and to be possessed of the direct dramatic impact of the legitimate theatre. <sup>76</sup>

The outcome of Menotti's close ties with his audiences was that he produced eloquent, momentous, and highly expressive works through these years; works that were written with the sincerity of true human understanding. The Medium, in particular, emphasized action as well as feeling through song, the balanced musico-dramatic combination that opera-going audiences of the time were looking for.

### Assessment: Broadway Opera and the Met

Thus far, the evidence for the changing trend in the evolution of Broadway opera, as musical theatre, argues that a certain theatrical philosophy had come into place by the early 1950's. This philosophy was observed in

- the focus and importance that producers of Broadway works placed on audiences, using whatever means they had to make their *product* of musical theatre more accessible to a new, wider public;
- the competitive battle that was waged through the Depression and postwar years between producers of opera and musical theatre for dwindling numbers of ticket-buyers.

The trend observed in the public affected things greatly, too. Audiences reverted to Broadway because they eschewed the dated production norms at the Metropolitan Opera, largely reflected as conventions of nineteenth-century opera. This was aggravated by the Met's position as, presumably, the main bastion of opera in New York.

Conversely, those who continued to favor the productions at the Metropolitan took issue with the modernization of opera, as observed in the Broadway productions of Weill, Blitzstein, Thomson, and Menotti. Admittedly, there continued to be followers of the Met who preferred the more traditional form of opera. Taken as a whole, the new philosophy revealed that Broadway opera was doing well at the expense of opera at the Metropolitan. It also revealed that the indicators of realism, observed in productions as far back as 1927 in Kern's Showboat and 1935 in Gershwin's Porgy and Bess, had a marked influence on the direction of Broadway musical theatre. The realist tendencies observed in Menottian opera (in the form of believable portrayal, numerous innovative devices, and the *integration* principle) had their province almost exclusively in Broadway works to the exclusion of works at the Met. In light of this, therefore, one can point to four major facts that emerge about the Metropolitan Opera up to this time:

- No work by an American ever had lasting success there,
- The Met continued to maintain a continuing policy of presenting opera in its original language,
- The Met continued to foster the "star system" mostly for financial reasons,
- Until much later in 1965 (with the establishment of the National Endowment of the Arts) most financial support continued to be derived exclusively from private sources. <sup>77</sup>

Tradition retained its continuing grip on policies at the Met. As a result, the prevailing production style at the Metropolitan Opera through these years was one that could be described as anti-realistic. The opera company's *ancien regime* preferred to revere the old times and to scorn the new. With increasing frequency one noted that for the opera company tradition often consisted of no more than the memory of the last bad performance, as Toscanini had once observed. Up to the early 1950's, production values at the Metropolitan Opera had not really changed. What change had occurred in opera, had taken place on Broadway.

## Notes to Chapter Four:

- 1 "Musical comedy" in The New Grove Dictionary of Music, vol. 12 (New York: Macmillan, 1980), p. 819.
- 2 David Ewen, The Story of America's Musical Theatre (New York: Chilton Book Co., 1961), p. 159.
- 3 "Musical comedy," NGDM, p. 821.
- 4 Marc A. Roth, "Kurt Weill and Broadway Opera" in Musical Theatre in America, ed. Glenn Loney (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1984), p. 268.
- 5 Ethan Mordden, A Fireside Companion to the Theatre (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), p. 162.
- 6 Ewen, America's Musical Theatre, p. 180.
- 7 The New Grove Dictionary of American Music, vol. 3 (New York: Macmillan, 1980), p. 417.
- 8 John Ardoin, The Stages of Menotti (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1985), p. 37.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 103.
- 10 Gerald Bordman, The American Musical Theatre: A Chronicle, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 535.
- 11 "Musical comedy," NGDM, p. 819.
- 12 "Musical comedy," NGDM, p. 821.
- 13 Richard Rodgers, Rodgers and Hammerstein Remembered (PBS TV program), 1987.
- 14 Joan Peyser, Leonard Bernstein: A Biography (New York: William Morrow, 1987), p. 258.
- 15 It was nothing new to radio, however. Weekly half-hour dramas that made effective use of brevity and sensationalism were in vogue throughout the 1930's and 1940's. Note The Shadow, The Whistler, and others.
- 16 Robert J. Dietz, "Blitzstein" in The New Grove Dictionary of Music, vol. 2 (New York: Macmillan, 1980), p. 795.
- 17 Harold Schonberg, "Consul is Staged in Central Park" in The New York Times, 4 September 1957.
- 18 "Musical theatre" in The New Grove Dictionary of American Music, vol. 3 (New York: Macmillan, 1980), p. 306.
- 19 In addition, Porter stressed that musical theatre also described an opera in which the strength of the theatrical element compensated for an insubstantial (or indifferent) musical score (as in Penderecki's The Devils of Loudun) or a manner of performance in which acting and staging were so vivid as to compensate for mediocre singing and playing (the carefully acted productions of Walter Felsenstein or Max Reinhart apply). Andrew Porter, "Music theatre" in New Grove Dictionary of Music, vol. 12 (New York: Macmillan, 1980), p. 863.
- 20 In time, this happy fact served to encourage the reassessment of theatrical values and restored to opera performed in America some of its artistic viability.
- 21 Ewen, America's Musical Theatre, p. 170.
- 22 The Earl of Harewood, ed., Kobbe's Complete Opera Book, revised ed. (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1976), p. 1324.
- 23 "Opera in the Twentieth Century: Naturalism" in The New Grove Dictionary of Music, vol. 13 (New York: Macmillan, 1980), p. 606.
- 24 "Musical theatre" in The New Grove Dictionary of American Music, vol. 3, p. 306.
- 25 Bordman, The American Musical Theatre, p. 534.
- 26 "Musical comedy," NGDM, p. 821.
- 27 "Opera in the Academy" in The New Grove Dictionary of American Music (New York: Macmillan, 1980), p. 418.
- 28 Bordman, The American Musical Theatre, p. 534.

- 29 Roth, "Kurt Weill and Broadway Opera," p. 268.
- 30 Dietz, "Blitzstein," NGDM, p. 795.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 "Musical comedy," NGDM, p. 819.
- 33 Roth, "Kurt Weill and Broadway Opera," p. 268.
- 34 Ewen, America's Musical Theatre, p. 151.
- 35 Robert Simon, "Oklahoma on Broadway" in The New Yorker 19, 29 May 1943, p. 61.
- 36 Rodgers and Hammerstein Remembered (PBS) 1987.
- 37 The New York Times, 1 April 1943.
- 38 Ewen, America's Musical Theatre, p. 152.
- 39 Rodgers and Hammerstein Remembered (PBS) 1987.
- 40 Lewis Nichols, "Music in the Air," in The New York Times, 11 April 1943, p. 1.
- 41 Rodgers and Hammerstein Remembered (PBS) 1987.
- 42 Gershwin's musical roots were in Tin Pan Alley. Some critics argued that the music of Porgy and Bess showed evidence of the popular-tune idiom of Tin Pan Alley and of his earlier musicals, especially the music written for the yearly George White Scandals of the 1920's.
- 43 Strengthening the place of Porgy and Bess in the American repertoire was a European tour in the early 1950's sponsored by the U.S. State Department. The tour showcased Leontyne Price as Bess and William Warfield as Porgy.
- 44 Charles Schwartz, Gershwin: His Life and Music (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1973), p. 265.
- 45 Time, 21 October 1935, p. 48.
- 46 "Gershwin's Opera Makes Boston Hit" in The New York Times, 1 October 1937, p. 27.
- 47 Brooks Atkinson, Broadway (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1970), p. 331.
- 48 Schwartz, Gershwin, p. 266.
- 49 Atkinson, Broadway, p. 333.
- 50 "Gershwin's Opera Makes Boston Hit," NYT, p. 27.
- 51 Bordman, The American Musical Theatre, p. 529.
- 52 Weill's prominence as a composer (and later Blitzstein's and Menotti's) argues against Bordman's opinion. In fact, what consideration he makes draws solely on composers of Broadway musicals. His focus on advancements in music theatre at the time, particularly on Broadway opera, is negligible.
- 53 The latter also saw a staged production in Philadelphia in 1941.
- 54 Joseph Machlis, "Gian Carlo Menotti's Medium" in Spoletto Festival Souvenir (Charleston, S.C.: Spoleto USA, 1979).
- 55 Francis Rizzo, "The Unicorn Gambols On" in Spoletto Festival Souvenir, (Charleston, S.C.: Spoleto USA, 1981), p. 37.
- 56 Ardoin, Menotti, p. 100.
- 57 Ibid., p. 99.
- 58 Ibid., p. 100.
- 59 Arthur Gelb, "Theatrical suspense in a composer's world" in The New York Times, 2 November 1958, p. 1.
- 60 Ibid.
- 61 N. Landsdale, "Menotti calls the Met a Museum" in Theatre Arts 36, May 1952, p. 92.
- 62 Donald Jay Grout, A Short History of Opera (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), p. 545.
- 63 Ibid.
- 64 J.M. Brown, "Seeing Things" in Saturday Review 30, 31 May 1947, pp. 22-23.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 22

<sup>66</sup> Robert Simon, "Musical Events Uptown" in The New Yorker 22, 18 May 1946, p. 96.

<sup>67</sup> Shortly following its Columbia University premiere in 1946, The Medium came to be paired up rather quickly with its now familiar companion piece, The Telephone, a short divertimento that aped the style of Italian opera buffa. The Telephone, also by Menotti, was commissioned for Lincoln Kirstein's Ballet Society and both works were presented on a double-bill at the Heckscher Playhouse in New York in 1947.

<sup>68</sup> Machlis, Spoletto Souvenir, p. 31.

<sup>69</sup> Ardoin, Menotti, p. 36.

<sup>70</sup> "Unblessed by the Met" in Time, 20 May 1946, p. 56.

<sup>71</sup> Irving Kolodin, "From Amelia to the Saint" in Saturday Review, 29 January 1955, p. 39.

<sup>72</sup> Gian Carlo Menotti, "Notes on Opera as Basic Theatre" in Perspectives USA 12, 1955, p. 5.

<sup>73</sup> Robert Ackart, "Style all the while, but what constitutes style?" in Musical America 75, 15 February 1955, p. 23.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>75</sup> Joan Roberts, the Broadway "Laurie," recounts how Rodgers came backstage during the run of the show to tell her "Everyone out there [in the audience] talks about how *American* you look!..."

<sup>76</sup> "Musical theatre," New Grove Dictionary of American Music, vol. 3, p. 306-7.

<sup>77</sup> "Opera in the Academy," The New Grove Dictionary of American Music, vol. 3, p. 418.

## Chapter Five

### The Literary Element in Menottian Opera: An Analysis

The appearance of an opera like the Medium on Broadway was rare. Its limited scope, its billing as an opera (not a musical play or musical comedy), and its theme all lent a singularity to the work. Menotti and his colleagues took a decided risk in mounting such a work and they had reason for concern. Ultimately, however, these same factors were the basis for the success of The Medium.

The inspiration for The Medium stemmed from an experience Menotti had while on vacation with Samuel Barber in the hamlet of St. Wolfgang near Salzburg in the late 1930's. Here Menotti met an English baroness whose behavior the composer found odd: every evening after dinner she would visit an "invisible chapel" (a seance room) for the purpose of communing with her deceased daughter named "Doodly." It seems the child had died at the age of fourteen of an infected tooth. The nightly routine of talking with her daughter had its beginnings in London when the baroness first met a medium to see if she could assuage her grief over the loss of her daughter. Menotti commented that the baroness "fascinated" him. He describes how at subsequent meetings held at her house,

the baroness asked me to come into her so-called chapel. We sat in the dark around a table. Suddenly she went into a trance and began speaking to her daughter. She kept saying, Doodly, can you hear me?...There was no doubt the baroness was actually seeing her daughter. I, on the other hand, saw nothing at all. <sup>1</sup>

Menotti reflects that he "felt cheated": the creative power of the baroness's faith and conviction made him examine his cynicism and led him to wonder about the multiple texture of reality. It also made him wonder "whether skepticism could destroy such creative power." <sup>2</sup>

Gruen points out that Menotti had always yearned to create "an entirely new and different type of opera." <sup>3</sup> The Medium truly was new and indeed quite different from other works that played during its time. But what kind of musical drama was it? Without

question the style of the opera is realistic in the starkest sense of the word. The form of the work, however, is that of melodrama. Even so, Menotti preferred to call his opera "a play of ideas." <sup>4</sup> In spite of its eerie and gruesome setting, The Medium described

the tragedy of a woman caught between two worlds, a world of reality which she cannot totally comprehend and a supernatural world in which she cannot wholly believe. <sup>5</sup>

As realistic drama, The Medium makes use of a curious mix of pathos and mysticism. Its impact is derived from what John Gruen called a "frank Italianate treatment of ordinary human beings as thoroughly interesting characters." <sup>6</sup> The story assumes the guise of melodrama and espouses its realism this way. Its lurid and violent quality is responsible for its being labeled a "thriller." <sup>7</sup> The *guignol*-like effects at the end of the opera are intended to elicit a particular response from the viewer and resemble those in such works as Il Tabarro, Cavalleria Rusticana and Pagliacci.

In simple terms The Medium is a ghost story. It deals with superstition. In symbolic terms it is about the struggle between faith and skepticism. Machlis prosaically refers to it as "a parable of the eternal struggle between faith and doubt." <sup>8</sup> The way in which it questions the nature of reality, the dilemma it portrays between faith and doubt and its use of symbols serve to support its theme.

Despite its tinges of the supernatural, The Medium portrays events that can be called "starkly realistic." Such events have a slice-of-life quality that characterizes earlier *veristic* works like Cavalleria Rusticana. The viewer imagines himself an on-looker. He peers in on the events surrounding Baba's family (Monica, her daughter and Toby, her adopted son), and Baba's clients (the Gobineaus and Mrs Nolan). Except for the eerie inciting moment at which she feels the hand on her neck, the on-looker sees a scene that might resemble a realistic one in everyday life. Both setting and characters lend themselves well to a slice-of-life depiction. The setting is contemporary and fits the

action quite well, and the characters are everyday people, except perhaps for the eponymous character of the "medium." Even the sordid quality of Baba's behavior (cheating her clients out of their money, the fake riggings she contrives for the seance, and her alcoholism) addresses this slice-of-life aspect.

What marks the events as melodramatic is the suspense that stems from the point of attack (the point at which Baba claims someone touched her), the beating of Toby in Act Two and the climactic violent shooting at the end. Happenings such as these leave the arena of everyday life, as Rosenberg has pointed out. At the same time, however, they are true in terms of the exciting, the stimulating, and the highly selective side of life.<sup>9</sup> This fact restores believability to the drama and draws the slice-of-life element back into it again, rounding out its *veristic*, or realistic, quality.

On the whole, the story of The Medium is believable because the situations, events and characters are believable. The family situation of Baba, Monica and Toby is one that realistically could exist. The preparation for the seance at the beginning of the opera makes what follows perfectly credible. Moreover, Baba's neurophobic behavior emanates out of one highly unusual event: someone touching her while she pretends to be in a trance. There is no explanation for this event and this feeds her fear and prompts her suspicion. Her behavior is believable because it is predictable. She wants to know who touched her. The degree to which she reacts to the unknown is in proportion to the line of work she is in: she purports to be a "medium." The happening is thus more than just passingly disconcerting for Baba (whereas it might not be for someone else); it verges on the intensely stressful. Her failure to learn the source of the unknown prompts her to react irrationally, "shattering her self assurance" as Menotti says. The degree to which she reacts is said to be justified and tends to characterize her behavior as believable. It is also reasonable to expect that Baba would lash out. The events prompt

her to drink and she abuses Toby. Such events resemble certain ones in today's news headlines, particularly among the poor.

Believability embraces the characters, too. One becomes aware at the outset of the opera (in the exposition) that Baba is not a real "medium," but a fake one. The three visitors (Mr. and Mrs. Gobineau and their friend, Mrs. Nolan) are credible because at some point in life one has encountered someone who typifies them -- a spiritualist, or someone who relies on daily astrological readings in the newspaper, or just the superstitious person in general. Mrs. Nolan is believable to the point of empathy. She anguishes over the untimely death of her child. This has brought her into the company of Mr. and Mrs. Gobineau. She learns that the Gobineaus periodically visit a "medium," and they invite Mrs. Nolan to come along. By resorting to a "medium," Mrs. Nolan is merely reaching out. She wants to speak with her dead child once again, a hope that, however remote, is nevertheless all she has. This affirms the believability of Mrs. Nolan's actions and her character.

Thematically, there are a number of common elements that The Medium shares with the *veristic* works of the late nineteenth-century. Two of these elements are rooted in Romanticism: the supernatural and the grotesque. These ideas appear in Menotti's operas the same way that they do in *verismo*.<sup>10</sup> The curse that Santuzza hurls at Turridu on Easter morning in Cavalleria Rusticana has its precedent in Rigoletto, for instance; Suor Angelica's vision of her daughter is traceable to the Wolf's Glen scene in Der Freischütz by von Weber. While no curse exists in The Medium, the supernatural exists here, too, not as a curse or a vision, but as the "unknown." Derived directly from Romanticism, the "unknown" manifests itself as the "hand" that touched Baba. It has Freudian implications<sup>11</sup> in Menotti and symbolizes the "force" that drives her.<sup>12</sup>

The "unknown" is apparent in the Romantic repertory of Verdi's day, in works such as La Forza del Destino, Il Trovatore and Don Carlo, for example; and in the French repertory, especially in Bizet's Carmen and in Charpentier's Louise. Verdi's La Forza del Destino reflects the "unknown" as Fate or Destiny.<sup>13</sup> In this opera the role of the antagonist belongs not to the soprano, the tenor or the baritone, but to an intangible force -- Destiny. It crushes the lives of all the characters. Similarly, the "unknown" in Il Trovatore brings together two lost brothers after years of separation. The "unknown" also claims the lives of two of the opera's lead characters. In Don Carlo, the "unknown" is the specter of King Charles V who returns from the grave to intercede and save Don Carlo at the end of the opera. In the French repertory, the "unknown" surfaces most visibly in Bizet's Carmen as Fate or Death. And in Louise by Charpentier the "unknown" is personified by the city of Paris. Grout provides a vivid description of it:

Along with realism, there is the symbolism in the weird figure of the Noctambulist, the personification of the "pleasure of Paris," the real figure of this opera...the presence of the great city, seductive, mysterious and fatal, enveloping persons and events in an atmosphere of poetry like that of the forest in Weber's *Freischütz*.<sup>14</sup>

In The Medium the "unknown" is a Romantic symbol and is present in the character of Toby. It is represented by Baba's haunting question, "Who touched me?" It incites Baba's neurophobic behavior which later causes events take on a frightening character. Baba's behavior has its forerunners in Boris Gudonov by Mussorgsky, particularly in the delusional death scene of Boris. The link with Mussorgsky is observable also in the "depiction given to gloom and mysticism...[in the] emotions of violence, brutality and madness."<sup>15</sup> The seance and communing with the dead finds its Romantic roots in the Wolf's Glen scene of Der Freischütz by von Weber, alluded to in the comment above by Grout. Precedents for the apparition scene in The Medium have

their roots in Shakespeare's Macbeth, in the appearance of the bloody dagger and the ghost of Banquo. Such scenes were later to find a place in Verdian opera, as well.

It is worth pointing out briefly that allusions to *intangibles* like the "unknown" make their way into Menotti's two later operas as well. The "unknown" in The Medium becomes the "unseen" in The Consul (1950) and a religious force of major proportions in The Saint of Bleeker Street (1954). The symbol of the "hand" that touches Baba becomes the icon of the "shadow" of the Consul who is ever-present but never appears. In The Saint of Bleeker Street the "hand" icon returns once again, this time as Annina's bleeding "hand" or *stigmata*. In The Saint of Bleeker Street the "hand" symbolizes religious redemption. These *intangibles* manifest themselves as forces in all three Menotti operas. In The Medium the force is conjured; in The Consul it is an oppressive force; and in The Saint of Bleeker Street the force can be described as compelling.

Throughout his career Menotti has made numerous references to the grotesque, the second main Romantic element, in characters who typify the handicapped, maimed, or disabled in some way. In The Medium this character is Toby, the boy mute. In The Consul it is Anna Gomez, who manifests a nervous tic. In The Saint the disabled character is Maria Corona's son who is described as "dumb." And there are others: Amahl in Amahl and the Night Visitors (1951), who is lame; Donato in Maria Golovin (1958), who is blind, et al. While few examples exist in the *verismo* repertory, two appear in Pagliacci: Tonio (a hunchback) and Beppe (often portrayed as a stutterer). There is one major parallel that can be drawn between Toby in The Medium and Tonio in Pagliacci. Both are antagonists, to be sure, but whereas Toby symbolizes a defiance against Baba's attempts to get to the truth, Tonio stands in the way of Nedda's pleasure. Tonio is unsightly, unkempt and Nedda wants nothing to do with him. She mocks him and when he tries to force himself on her, Nedda quickly responds with a whip. The grotesque character of

Tonio is aggressive, while that of Toby is silent and passive. But Toby's role is more dominant. He impedes Baba's efforts to arrive at her objective. The more "immutably silent" Toby is, the further removed Baba is from the "truth." <sup>16</sup>

Shock or surprise, often strategically placed at the ends of works, is a conspicuous dramatic element in Menotti's operas, The Medium in particular. Violent endings in *verismo* opera are commonplace, to be sure. One is acquainted, for instance, with the stabbing which concludes Cavalleria Rusticana. But the strangulation of Luigi in Il Tabarro, and the murders of Scarpia (in Tosca) and Silvio and Nedda (in Pagliacci) are more unexpected. They come as more of a surprise. They stun the viewer, particularly if one is new to the work. So, too, with Michele's killing of Desideria in The Saint of Bleeker Street, Magda's suicide in The Consul, and the shooting of Toby in The Medium. The viewer is jolted to the same degree, quite unexpectedly. While "the *veristi* did not bother much about technique," but went, rather, "straight for [the] violence," <sup>17</sup> Menotti preferred to use shock devices and surprises as integral cogs in a tightly constructed dramatic wheel. In this way, he was able to prevent an otherwise dramatically stimulating device from degenerating into a gratuitous spectacle.

#### **A Dramatic Analysis:**

For purposes of analysis, the reader needs to refer to the Schirmer score of The Medium (1967 reprint). The writer refers to the page, followed by system, followed by the measure number. For example, 3:4:5, means page 3, second system, bar number 5. Sometimes also, reference is made to rehearsal numbers which appear encircled. Rehearsal numbers are sequential and are placed at major musical points throughout the piano-vocal score. Please note also that minor editorial differences exist between the early and later versions of the score. In order to eliminate confusion, therefore, only the later (1967) version is referred to.

In terms of structure, the play of The Medium is in two short acts. Act One opens with a very brief 28-bar musical introduction. It is not as brief as the introductory openings to such operas as La Boheme or Tosca, but considerably shorter than the prelude to Cavalleria Rusticana or the Prologue to Pagliacci. The exposition, largely informative, runs from rehearsal #2 to rehearsal #25. Here Menotti provides preparatory details on his six characters, <sup>18</sup> establishes relationships between them, informs the viewer that Baba is a "medium," and begins the *seance*. The *seance* itself runs from rehearsal #17 to rehearsal # 25. The point of attack occurs at rehearsal #25, the point at which Baba feels "a hand touch her throat." From here to the end of Act One [60:3:4], events serve to intensify the suspense. Within this span of time Menotti alternates events between tension and relief in this way:

- tension      Baba wants to know who touched her (rehearsal #26)
- relief        Goubineaus and Mrs. Nolan leave (43:1:1)
- tension      Baba wants to know where Toby is (rehearsal #30)
- relief        Monica calms Baba down with the lullaby of the Black Swan (51:3:2)
- tension      Baba hears the voice of the dead children (56:2:1)
- relief        Monica resumes her lullaby while Baba prays (59:4:3)

By alternating the intensity level of events at the end of Act One, Menotti manages to avoid either wearying or too easily satisfying the audience.

In Act Two events progress at a steady pace. As in Act One, the protagonist (Baba) is absent at the outset of the act. After a 31-bar introduction one encounters a puppet play <sup>19</sup> in progress followed by child's play during which Monica pretends to speak for Toby. The tenderness of this opening scene informs the audience of the strong bond that exists between the two children. The entire opening scene clearly is juxtaposed against the brutal events that follow. This section moves through a series of complications to the crisis. Following the reentry of Baba at 70:2:2 until she orders Toby to leave the house at rehearsal #28 (the crisis), events stay at a fevered pitch. The events are:

- Monica and Toby at play, Monica sings a waltz, pretends to "speak" for Toby (62:4:1)
- Baba, now drunk, reenters and begins coaxing Toby to admit he was the one who touched her the night of the seance; she tries to bribe him (rehearsal #7)
- Meeting with no success, she resorts to beating Toby with a whip (rehearsal #12)
- Baba flagellates Toby, is interrupted by the return of Baba's three clients (84:4:1)
- Baba turns on them, tells them there will be no more seances, gives their money back, displays the tricks she uses in cheating them, tells them to leave (86:2:3)

The crisis point occurs when Baba orders Toby to leave the house and not come back. From here events have no turning back. Even if Toby were not to leave, things would be no different between them. One could speculate also that Toby could give in to Baba and concede that what she wants to hear is true, but this is improbable. Toby's strength of character and his innocence do not permit him to behave this way. This, therefore, leaves open the question, who did touch Baba?

The ensuing events (beginning at 104:2:1) serve to prepare the climax and constitute the concluding portion of the play. The tranquil quality of the situation from here to just before the climax (the shooting of Toby) balances the anxiety of events that led up to this point. Events progress as follows:

- After Toby is gone, Baba locks Monica in her room (105:1:2)
- Baba quiets down, thinks back on some frightful events in her life (rehearsal #31)
- Her reminiscences upset her but she manages to regain her composure (113:1:1)
- Bottle in hand and now in a stupor, Baba lulls herself to sleep (114:4:5)
- In the dark Toby now quietly sneaks back in the house, he has forgotten his tambourine and wants to say farewell to Monica (rehearsal #37)
- While Baba stirs in her sleep, Toby rifles through the children's trunk and inadvertently lets the lid fall, it slams (rehearsal # 38)
- The thud of the lid startles and awakens Baba, Toby runs and hides behind the screen of the puppet theatre (117:4:1)
- Terrified, Baba calls out "who is there?" and notices the curtains moving (117:4:3)
- Baba draws a revolver out of a drawer in the table, hysterically warning whoever is there to come out (rehearsal #41)

The shooting of Toby marks the climax of the play (119:2:1). All events up to this point support the brutal outcome. The lightning-quick ending is typically *veristic* and calls to mind the murders at the end of both Pagliacci and Cavalleria Rusticana. The purpose of the final scene is merely to shock: the protagonist has killed not just anyone, she has killed a young boy. It is important to note that the play leaves the dramatic question of who touched Baba (121:22) unanswered. The absence of this resolution is intensified by this final line of the opera. The spoken final line thus recalls the ending lines in both Cavalleria Rusticana and Pagliacci, which are also intended to be spoken (or rather screamed in Cavalleria Rusticana) --

"L'hanno ammazzato a compare Turriddu!"<sup>20</sup> (at end of Cavalleria Rusticana)

"La commedia e finita!"<sup>21</sup> (at end of Pagliacci)

The conflict in The Medium, therefore, arises out of the opposition of two forces: Baba's burning desire to know versus Toby's immutable silence.

### Character Analysis:

Bertrand Russell has said that fear is the main source of superstition and one of the main sources of cruelty. <sup>22</sup> Menotti's character of Baba incorporates all three elements: fear, superstition, and cruelty. Baba controls the lives of her children the only way she knows how-- ruthlessly. She has been hardened by her experiences (see text of Act Two rehearsal #31) and as a result she has become callous. In her struggle to survive her frightening experiences (Act Two rehearsal #32), she has grown aggressive, brutal, and abusive, given to cheating and corruption. At the point that one first sees her in the play she has become delusional and tends to react violently. Machlis draws attention to this by saying that

the real and the unreal merge in [Baba's] distraught mind until she can no longer distinguish between them. Her fears and doubts feed each other...<sup>23</sup>

By the indications that the score provides, Baba is alcoholic or exhibits these tendencies. Her behavior might be characterized more aptly as addictive. Baba's main intention is derived from wanting to learn who touched her. <sup>24</sup>

Baba's protagonistic drive finds its antagonist object in Toby. She identifies Toby with her own guilt over the deception she practices. By labeling The Medium "a play of ideas," Menotti permits Toby to be characterized both as a person and a symbol. Toby symbolizes Baba's conscience. He also symbolizes the inarticulate in all of us. Whereas Baba is thoroughly aggressive, Toby is thoroughly passive. Like Baba, Toby has also learned to survive. Already in his very early teen years he is wary of things, protective, guarded. Baba reveals she "found Toby...a little starving gypsy roaming the streets of Budapest" (Act Two rehearsal #9 and # 10). One gleans from the way Toby sees the world that he is genuine yet frightened. Still, he remains a child and sees the world through a child's eyes, a world that appears both "strange and wonderful" (a typical

Romantic attitude). His abandon as he plays with Monica in the beginning of Act Two attests to this. His relationship with Monica is one of need. Monica symbolizes Toby's solace, his only comfort. With Monica, Toby shares a vision of his world, the only way a brother could with a loving older sister. He knows Monica cares about him. He wants to tell her he loves her, but nature has deprived him of words. Toby's main intention is to get Baba to stop hurting him.

The character of Monica has as its symbol, love. She is the peacekeeper. It would be more correct to say she is a go-between. In this she is passive-aggressive. She fears she will set Baba off, but knows she must stand up for Toby in any way that she can. Like Toby, Monica has also learned how to survive in a stressful home environment. She, too, has learned to be guarded. To this end, she has learned co-dependent behavior, though inwardly she is a nurturing and very tender young girl. She has yet to shed her childhood, but her caretaking of Toby has prompted some early maturity. She knows the truth about Baba, realizes that Baba makes her living as a fraud. She knows, too, that it is only a matter of time before she (Monica) leaves home. Her primary want at this point is to protect Toby from Baba.

Baba's clients symbolize unquestioning faith. As true seekers, they are quick to believe and highly gullible. Of the three, Mrs. Nolan is the most empathetic. She comes to Baba with a full expectation that she will hear and perhaps even see her daughter, "Doodly." When Baba refuses to have any more seances, they challenge her disbelief with their own illusions. Their need to believe cuts deeper than logic. Their faith is stronger than any argument. <sup>25</sup>

### **Musical Analysis of The Medium**

The following is a brief musical analysis of Menotti's musical style as observed in The Medium. The analysis bridges related areas between Menotti and the musical style of *verismo* composers.

One of most significant aspects of Menotti's musical style is its characteristic leanness. There is an inherent power, a self-sufficiency and a self-generating quality that characterizes this leanness and gives Menotti's style a unique and highly expressive quality. Menotti draws on a number of past musical influences that contribute to the eclectic character of his music. His is a style that looks back rather than forward. All musical borrowings have their own unique sphere of influence. One observes, for example, a link with Schubert in the lyrical and expressive quality of his melodies. Menotti himself concedes this link:

If anything, my melodic source springs from Schubert, whose deceptively simple melodies still mesmerize me...<sup>26</sup>

The influence of Mussorgsky is seen in Menotti's harmony, particularly in his occasional use of parallelism and modality. The link with Mussorgsky is apparent also in Menotti's economy of musical material, the clarity of his musical line and what one observer describes as an "intimate" type of orchestral technique. <sup>27</sup> A fondness for Mussorgsky shows up in certain commanding musical gestures like the opening chords of The Medium.

Menotti's musico-dramatic affinities, on the other hand, have a clear connection with Puccini. Menotti has absorbed the Puccinian style in being able to slide in and out of aria-like passages, in the use of certain kinds of recitative, in the utilization of the orchestra to underscore the vocal line, and in the use of *melodia dolorosa*, a climax-building device. Of all Puccini's operas, Menotti's writing has a close kinship with the

style of Il Tabarro. Borrowings and resemblances exist here in terms of dramatic effects, mood and theatricality. While Menotti's melodies clearly emulate Puccini's, Menotti himself maintains that all such borrowings are mostly dramatic rather than melodic. In overall effect, Menotti's Amelia at the Ball displays much of the Puccinian style. To a lesser degree, The Consul and Saint of Bleecker Street typify Puccini as well. The Medium can thus be said to straddle the fence: musico-dramatically there is an affinity with Puccini; harmonically one observes a kinship with Mussorgsky.

Finally, Menotti owes a debt to Richard Rodgers in the expansive format given to the aria. The compassionate quality of Rodgers' music in Carousel, the *Soliloquy* of Billy Bigelow in particular, represents a major musical leap forward for the showtune form on Broadway, especially for composers like Rodgers. The notion of the integration of music and drama imbued numbers like this (and others) with the expansive feel of the aria. Rodgers' respected position on Broadway and the fact that he chose to innovate in the direction of opera legitimized the efforts of composers like Menotti who were already working in the form from the start.

### **Vocal Writing**

Menotti's melodies have a utility and simplicity that is unquestionable. They are at the same time tonal, easily remembered, often modal, and sometimes both sequential and repetitive. The theme of the Black Swan at 51:3:2 and the beginning phrase of Monica's waltz at 64:1:1 contain the tuneful character that typifies most lyrical melody found in Menotti. Menotti admits that

What I studied in Puccini was his use of melodic recitative that did not impair the dramatic action...it allowed for an easy unfolding of the dramatic pace... without ever sacrificing the melodic flow of the music. I think that La Boheme is a masterpiece in this respect, an unsurpassed model of Italian *parlar cantando*.<sup>28</sup>

This *parlar cantando* in The Medium appears in the lines of Mrs. Nolan and Mr. Gobineau on page 17. Here the vocal lines are free of accompaniment. The chant-like recitatives of Baba and Mr. Gobineau on page 40 are further examples. For the most part, all such recitatives are sung very freely in regard to both rhythm and declamation. Menotti says that whenever he indicates *declamato* in the score, "the rhythm and pitch indicated are to be regarded as only approximate."<sup>29</sup>

The quasi *parlato* figures alternate with more lyrical vocal lines in the examples on page 40-41 of The Medium. There exist similar examples in Cavalleria Rusticana that utilize this technique as well, as when Mamma Lucia asks Turridu why he speaks the way he does (toward the end of the opera, Schirmer score page 141). Turridu replies there is no reason to be concerned. It is nothing; it is merely the wine that makes him say the things he does (see

Figure 1 below).

LUCIA. *quasi a piacere.* Per-chè par-li co-sì, fi-glio-lo mi-o?  
 TURRIDU. *Largo.* Oh! sul-la, è il  
*a tempo rubato.* vi-no che m'ha sug-ge-ri-to! *Tempo I. con anima.* m'ha sug-ge-ri-to il vi-no. Per-me pre-ga-te Jd  
*con espress.* di-o, per-me pre-ga-te Jd *affrett. e cresc.* di-o un ba-cio, un ba-cio mamma! un al-tro.

Figure 1)

In The Medium the *parlando* style is used also almost as consistently as the arioso style.

Menotti enjoys alternating a short, excitable type of vocal patter with equally excitable musical fragments (see page 43). Such short, frantic, breathless vocal lines can be characterized as truncated, disjunct, or *fractured* (see page 49-50). Examples of *fractured melody* in Menotti occur in Baba's aria, "Why am I afraid?" on page 111:2:

4-7 and 112:1:1-3. These lines are an interrupted type of melodic fragment; dramatic circumstances are usually responsible for the shortening of such lines. Menotti is also fond of recitative made up of falling thirds (the natural inflection used in calling); it gives vitality to certain lines and lends an appreciable *parlando* quality to them (see Baba's lines at rehearsal #11 to rehearsal #12 on page 74-76).

Vocal writing that emulates anguish is found at rehearsal #33 on page 110:2:2. Similar expressions of intense emotion are found also on page 59:2:3ff. Here Baba is so tormented that she resorts to prayer; the voice expresses the magnitude of her anguish. A type of similar vocal line, one that becomes increasingly emotional as it ascends, is present on page 46:2 and page 44:3. In line with this, Grout tells us that *verismo* composers

perceived that the high points of effectiveness in Verdi were marked by phrases [which were]...peculiarly poignant, gathering up...a feeling of a scene in a pure and concentrated moment of expression.<sup>30</sup>

This led composers like Puccini, Mascagni and Leoncavallo to imitate this characteristic in Verdi. One can see this very same tendency in Menotti. His use of the rising, intense phrases, after the manner of the *veristi*, constitutes a kind of melodramatic shock.

The use of the voice to heighten melodrama is exemplified in Menotti's use of spoken lines over music (see page 37). Other appearances of spoken lines over an agitated musical figure appear on page 33, page 35 at rehearsal #24 and again in Baba's prayer (*Ave Maria*) on page 59:4:3. This type of accompanied vocal line has a marked dramatic function; it also typifies the earliest kind of melodrama known to opera, examples of which are found in the early nineteenth-century operas of *Fidelio* and *Der Freischütz* as well as the early nineteenth-century French repertoire.<sup>31</sup>

### Leitmotifs and Musical Recurrence

Menotti's use of leitmotifs brings him into kinship with the *veristi*. As with Puccini, Mascagni, and Leoncavallo before him, Menotti's use of leitmotifs have a purely reminiscent function. He does not develop his leitmotifs in the true Wagnerian sense. Leitmotifs in Menotti merely remind the viewer of the dramatic circumstance in which the character was first seen. In The Medium there are seven such recurrent themes.

They are:

- the theme of the medium
- the theme of Monica's waltz
- the theme of Toby
- the theme of the dead child, Doodly
- the theme of the seance
- the theme of Baba's three clients
- the theme of Baba's fear

The first of these, the theme of the medium, is represented by the opening chords of the opera. These chords recur at the opening of Act Two (page 61) and immediately following the shooting of Toby at the end of the opera (page 119:3:4). The theme of Monica's Waltz first appears in Act Two on page 116:1:4. This second theme recurs in slightly modified form on page 104:2:1. Here it represents the two children playing (Monica and Toby). The theme of Toby takes on three different guises: on page 66:1:1-3, page 71:1:1, and at rehearsal #28 on page 103:3:2 the theme represents Toby's love for Monica; at page 115:4:2ff the theme signifies Toby's farewell; and at rehearsal #43 on page 121:3:1-5 (at the end of the opera) the theme stands for Toby's immutable silence.

The fourth motif, the theme of the dead child of Mrs. Nolan (Doodly), sees its first appearance during the seance at rehearsal #18 on page 25:3:1. It is represented here by a descending four-note phrase on the words, "Mother, mother, are you there?" The theme returns to haunt Baba when she hears voices at rehearsal #35 on page 56:1:1 and again in modified form (this time as laughter) at page 58:3:3 and page 59:1:1 (see

accompaniment). One observes it twice more when Baba orders Toby out of the house on page 105.

The theme of the seance itself occurs in the melody at page 77:1:3 through 77:2:1 and again at rehearsal #13 on page 77:3:2 (see accompaniment). With some modification it is present again at rehearsal #29 on page 105:1:2. The sixth recurrent theme, symbolizing Baba's clients (Mr. and Mrs. Goubineau and Mrs. Nolan), occurs on page 61:2:1 and once again on page 84:4:1.

The seventh and final (and most pervasive) theme is the stabbing three-note staccato figure that enters on page 7:1:1. In its initial appearances it denotes the malice of Baba (her foreboding nature) as it does on pages 70:2:2 and 71:2:1-3. Near the end of the second act, the motif represents Baba's fear of the unknown (see pages 104:3:2 and 105:2:3-4). In this guise it recurs at page 116:3:1 in the bass line. Here Baba stirs in her sleep as Toby scratches on Monica's door, wanting to say goodbye to her. It is also present in modified form when Baba wakes up from her drunken stupor at rehearsal #40 on page 117:4. The motif of the fear of Baba comprises the musical material for the entire section leading up to the shooting of Toby, beginning on page 118-119 (see the accompaniment).

### **Arias and Aria-like Structures**

Even though Menotti disguises his arias in continuous musical textures, arias are nevertheless observable. The lullaby of the Black Swan, which begins as a solo sung by Monica, is 54 bars long. It is interrupted by the sound of the dead child's voice at page 56. The lullaby is in ternary (or ABA) form. The A section begins on page 51:3:2; the B section on page 53:3:3; and the return of the A occurs at page 54:3:3. At the return of the A section, the entry of the second voice acts as a round for 4 bars. What began as an aria turns into a duet. It is important to note that Baba joins Monica in the lullaby

because at this point she is horrified and is resorting to singing in an attempt to distract herself from her fear. The incidence of a duet at this point has a purely dramatic function. Shortly after, the duet is interrupted by the theme of the dead child, followed by a short arioso section during which Baba accuses Toby of lying. The lullaby then concludes as it began (as an aria), utilizing an eerie pentatonic musical figure in the accompaniment (page 60:3:2-4).

Menotti is fond of disguising duets as arias in The Medium. The Waltz of Monica which opens Act Two, for example, is really a duet between Toby and Monica. Given that Toby is mute, however, it is sung by Monica alone. The dramatic touch is apparent and highly innovative. The form of the Waltz is strophic and makes use of a number of repetitions. Musical periods denote the various sections.

#### **Observations Regarding Keys**

The A section which is 8 bars long starts on page 63:3:1; the B section (10 bars long) starts on page 64:3:1 (includes repetition). The duet alternates every four bars between characters. First Monica sings as herself, then she sings for Toby. While this sounds absurd at first (and militates for describing the piece as an aria), dramatic reasons obviously justify calling the Waltz a duet: Toby has fallen in love with Monica. She is all he has ever known in the way of a friend. Toby's youthfulness also intensifies his feeling, but try as he might, he will never be able to utter his love to her. Monica is aware of Toby's loyalty and sincere affection for her. She is, furthermore, pained by his inability to speak and would give anything to cure his muteness. This play-acting and pretending to be Toby is therefore a caring gesture on her part. Toby recognizes this and plays along. The rapport between the children elicits feelings of tenderness in the viewer and it brings a humanity and realism to this musical number which justifies its being described as a duet.

In the F major duet, Menotti's alternation between major and minor (see rehearsal #2 on page 63, the first four bars) adds color to the Waltz. After its excursion into D major/minor at the top of page 64:1:1, the piece moves into E major/minor at rehearsal #3 on page 65. The Debussian effect on page 67:1:2 on the metaphor, "You are my light," underscored by half diminished chords, is highly effective. One observes the pedal point on *e* at page 66:3:1. Toby's musical lines here make use of ascending step-wise motion (unlike page 68:2:1 which makes use of leaps and disjunct motion). One also observes a tender moment as Toby watches Monica utter precisely what he wishes he could say himself. The climax note of the piece (the high B<sup>b</sup>) happens on page 69:2:2. The *a* minor chord here has an auxiliary function. The waltz ends on page 70 in d# minor (but not before alluding to E major).

Whenever Monica speaks for herself, the vocal line moves in stepwise motion (note the descending conjunct lines on page 68:4:1). On page 69 Menotti uses musical patterning to heighten the emotion of the vocal line, which intensifies and finally climaxes on the high B<sup>b</sup>. A similar musical effect is achieved in Act Three of *Tosca* on the "trionfal!" line sung by Cavaradossi and Tosca. The heightening of emotion occurs on the triplet-eighth-note figure:



Figure 2)

A clearer example of this tiered intensification of emotion in the vocal line is present in the second scene of Act Two of Puccini's *Turandot*, at the point in which the Princess

poses the three enigmas to Calaf. Here, the patterned, ascending key-shifts serve to heighten the musical dramatic moment as well:

The image shows a musical score for two characters: TURANDOT and IL PRINCIPE. The score consists of two staves of music with lyrics in Italian. The lyrics are: "Glie - . nig - mi so - no tre, la mor - te è u - na! No! No! Glie - . nig - mi so - no tre, una è la - vi - ta! No! No! Glie - . nig - mi so - no tre, la mor - te è u - na!". The score includes dynamic markings such as "cresc." and "ten." and tempo markings like "Allegretto".

Figure 3)

At the end of the duet in The Medium (at page 69:3:1), the harmony breaks down because Toby emotionally breaks down. As a rule, the character of the waltz changes throughout as the dramatic situation changes. This change is most evident in the text.

In places like page 67:2:2 Menotti changes the character of the aria not through overt means, but by the subtle adding of staccato sixteenth notes in the accompaniment. All the while, however, the piece retains its triple meter feel, the one with which it began.

There are some elegant moments in the score, made so by Menotti's use of image, a poetic handling of language and the treatment of metaphor. Observe the one on page 67 in the line --

*"You haunt the mirror of my sleep...you are the jailer of my days..."*

Menotti enjoys mixing his metaphors, too; note page 68:1-3. Here he adds "laughter" to the list of blood, hair, eyes, hands, and throat.

Baba has two large musical sections in the opera that constitute "arias." The first, made up mostly of arioso material, culminates with the whipping of Toby. It begins on page 72 and goes to page 84 of the score. Every part of this musical section accords with Baba's temperament. The music and the action are entirely dictated by the drama.

The introductory section at rehearsal #8 on page 70 (which goes to rehearsal #9) is mostly *parlato* recitative. Here the music addresses the dramatic action. The *lento* section (observe the smooth eighth notes in the accompaniment) begins at rehearsal #9 on page 72:2:3 and goes to rehearsal #11 on page 74:4:1. There follows a *parlato* section in which Baba tries to extract from Toby some answer as to what happened the night of the seance (see page 74:4:2 to page 76:3:2). The incidence of a pedal point intensifies the suspense and lends an ominous flavor to what may happen at page 76:4:2. The jabbing, stabbing musical figure at rehearsal #16 on page 81:3:2 characterizes Baba's fury. Finally, six separate chords underscore the whipping of Toby on page 83-84. It is important to note that Baba regains her composure three times, but any such composure is rent immediately asunder in the following moments, a feature highly typical of *verismo*. Sectionally, there are three large parts to the aria: the first of three sections culminates at rehearsal #12 on page 76:3:2; the second culminates at rehearsal #15 on page 80:1:2; the third section culminates with the beating of Toby on page 83:3:1 (Baba whips him six times). One can say that the musical statement (chord) each time Toby is hit, constitutes a kind of musical realism.

Baba's aria-like section at the end of the opera (her psychological delusion) is divided into two parts, the second of which is longer than the first. Part one (beginning at rehearsal #31 on page 106:4:3) is mostly descriptive. The music which begins part two (on page 109:3:3) becomes self-consolatory. Later on (on page 112:2:1), it can be said to represent hysteria. The end of part two (which returns to the beginning tempo on page 114:3:1) can be described as supplicatory.

### Other Musical Devices

Like Mascagni, Leoncavallo and Puccini, Menotti makes use of preludes, interludes and transitional musical material in The Medium. For example, one can call the first 29 bars of the opera an opening prelude. It is about as long as the opening of Puccini's Tosca (24 bars long) or the opening bars leading to Marcello's first line in La Boheme (33 bars). The prelude to Act Two of The Medium is 31 bars long, compared to -- 49 bars of the intermezzo to Cavalleria Rusticana, 29 introductory bars to Act Two of Pagliacci, 30 bars before Act Two of Madame Butterfly, 9 short bars to the opening of Act Two of Tosca, and 17 bars to the chorus' first lines in Act Two of La Boheme.

Interlude material in The Medium is used mostly for purposes of musical background, as it is leading up to the preparation of the seance on page 12 and 13. Here the music underscores the scurried activity of Monica and Toby, and therefore has a musico-dramatic function. The musical interlude on page 22 allows for the action of Baba's three clients to walk over to the seance table. The interlude music on page 38:1-3 dramatizes Baba's fear at being touched by something unknown. There is a very interesting two-bar chromatic figure that makes up the introduction to the lullaby of the Black Swan on page 51:2:2-3. This music allows time for Baba to sit down and lay her head on Monica's lap. All such interlude material can thus be said to depict some physical action in the opera.

Musical pauses in Menotti are extremely effective and comprise one of the composer's principal dramatic devices. Pauses and silences are carefully planned and have the effect of punctuating vocal lines. On this point it is said that Menotti kept in mind Verdi's advice: "to write good opera one must find the courage at times *not* to write music."<sup>32</sup> The pause at page 24, for instance, intensifies the moment of anticipation and suspense as everyone awaits Baba to enter her hypnotic trance. The pause on page 13:1:4

serves to amplify the ringing of the doorbell, while the pause at Baba's entrance on page 7 has an entirely different function. Here, the silence is ominous and it underscores Baba's menacing nature. Finally, while the pause at rehearsal #16 on page 81:3:1 represents a turning point in Baba's emotional state (she finally loses her patience with Toby), the pause that precedes the shooting of Toby on page 119:2:1 lends impact to the eight chords over a C pedal that follow one after the other.

Musical realism in The Medium is observed in only a few places. One of the most marked such occurrences is the modal figure at rehearsal #24 on page 35. This "rocking" figure alludes to the dead child's things such as her music box, her rocking chair, etc. The major-minor trills at rehearsal #30 on page 106:2:2 lend an eeriness to the dramatic situation. They denote Baba's vacillation between composure and fear. The tritone figure at the top of page 115:1:3-4 (from e to a#) is another instance of musical realism. It intensifies the eeriness of mood. Musical descriptiveness is further observed on page 113:2:2ff in the accompaniment lines that depict laughter (highly melodramatic), and in the lid falling on the trunk on page 117:4:1 (one bar before rehearsal #40).

There are a few additional musical devices that serve Menotti's melodramatic needs. For example, he enjoys punctuating dramatic lines with short, stabbing musical material (see page 34 and 35, bass line). Pedal points are yet another favorite device: see the melodic arpeggiations over an E pedal on page 26 and 27 and the Ab/Db pedal around Mr. Gobineau's recitative at page 24. Although infrequent in this opera, there is a use of imitation on page 42:3:2-3 in the ensemble. Likewise, what appearance there is of ostinato is to be seen on page 25 in the accompaniment. Ostinato has a "background" function in Menotti. It is never developed for purely musical reasons. A device that characterizes much of Menotti's style is the incidence of the pattern of irregular meters.

This can be seen on page 39. Here the metrical patterns shift back and forth from triple to duple meter. While Menotti's subsequent two operas of The Consul and The Saint of Bleeker Street make much use of ensemble writing, the instance of ensembles in The Medium is observed in two places only: page 41 and page 85. Interestingly, both ensembles culminate with Baba chasing her clients out of the house. The second of these ensembles makes a passing use of modality, another of Menotti's devices. Note the treble lines on page 95:2:1ff. The link with Mussorgsky is apparent here in the Aeolian scale. The music proceeds in this manner to page 98. Baba's prayer at 114:3:1 is another example of transposed Aeolian.

## Notes to Chapter Five:

- 1 John Ardoin, The Stages of Menotti (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1985), p. 40.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 John Gruen, "When the Critics Damn You" in The New York Times, 14 April 1974, p. 17.
- 4 Ardoin, Menotti, p. 40.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Gruen, "When Critics Damn You," p. 62.
- 7 J.M. Brown, "Seeing Things" in Saturday Review 30, 31 May 1947, p. 28.
- 8 Joseph Machlis, "Gian Carlo Menotti's Medium" in Spoletto Festival Souvenir (Charleston, S.C.: Spoleto USA, 1979), p. 31.
- 9 James Rosenberg, The Context and the Craft of Drama (New York: Intext, 1964), p. 185.
- 10 For the sake of clarity, a distinction can be drawn between realism and Romanticism. The following analogy is a suitable one: imagine a block of wood and a force pushing against it. Whereas realism concentrates on a description of that block of wood, Romanticism sees it as an illustration or a symbol, a suggestion of some larger philosophical truth. Naturalism, on the other hand, looks for a clue or a key to a scientific law that governs it. It is more interested in the *relationship* between the source and the block.
- 11 Olin Downes in a review in 1947 specifically draws attention to "the overtones of mystery, Freud and Grand Guignol" in The Medium. Brown, Saturday Review, p. 23.
- 12 For all their desperation, moreover, neither Baba nor Santuzza ever resolves her dilemma.
- 13 The opera of La Forza del Destino is based on a Spanish work of a similar title, Don Alvaro o la fuerza del Sino by Angel de Saavedra (1835). It should be pointed out that the term *Sino* in Spanish has a meaning that equates strongly to fate as well as to destiny.
- 14 Donald Jay Grout, A Short History of Opera (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), p. 437.
- 15 Ibid., p.464.
- 16 Ardoin, Menotti, p. 40.
- 17 Edward J. Dent, Opera (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1940; reprint ed., Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1965), p. 115.
- 18 Not including the offstage voices of the deceased children.
- 19 The puppet play here looks back to Paoliacci and the play-within-the play idea. In the opera by Leoncavallo, the *commedia* embraces most of the action of the second act. In The Medium, it is merely a vestige of this motif and represents the silent world of a child, Toby's.
- 20 "They have killed our friend Turriddu!" The line is yelled by a peasant. The murder happens offstage.
- 21 "The comedy is finished!" This final line was originally assigned to Tonio in the score. There is evidence to support the fact that Caruso usurped this line, originally intended for the baritone. It has remained the tenor's ever since.
- 22 From Bertrand Russell's, An Outline of Intellectual Rubbish.
- 23 Machlis, Spoletto Souvenir, 1979, p. 31.
- 24 This is also the dramatic question of the play.
- 25 Machlis, Spoletto Souvenir, 1979, p. 33.
- 26 Ardoin, Menotti, p. 37.
- 27 Judith Fryer, "Realism: A Major factor in Menotti's Operatic Style" in Opera Journal 1974, p. 33.
- 28 Ardoin, Menotti, p. 37.
- 29 Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>30</sup> Grout, SHO, p. 441.

<sup>31</sup> There is evidence of melodrama in Mehul's *rescue* operas. Here a sustained line in the orchestra usually supports a brief spoken line of text.

<sup>32</sup> Ardoin, Menotti, p. 43.

## Chapter Six

### Observations on the Decline of Verismo

The foregoing chapters on Menotti have proposed that strong links have existed between *verismo* and Menotti's form of Broadway opera or *neo-verismo*. The first part of this chapter will address *neo-verismo* more specifically and propose reasons for its observable decline in Menotti's works, particularly in light of the parallel with the earlier form. The writer will explain the importance of artistic sincerity in Menotti's compositional style; specifically, how musico-theatrical honesty as an artistic impulse has become a discernible validator of Menotti's work. An examination will be made of the qualities in Menotti that have brought him favor with the public. These aspects are looked at with respect to Italian *verismo* and parallels are examined in this context. The writer looks for links with the commercial and the influence of business practices in particular. The study then tries to see if there is a justification between the Menottian "Credo" (his musico-theatrical beliefs) and observable manifestations of the same in his *oeuvre*. The purpose of this is to affirm that Menotti essentially practiced what he preached, artistically. Finally, consideration is given to the critical view of Menottian opera. Judgements are assessed based on the view by the press of The Medium, The Consul, and to a lesser degree, The Saint of Bleeker Street. The objective here is to clarify the standard or the basis for judgement that has been applied to Menotti's works, and to show how, in the end, critical coverage contributed rather greatly to the stigma that has now come to be attached to his operas from this period.

On the whole, commentators who have contributed judgements on *verismo* fall into two camps: literary *cum* journalistic critics of the late nineteenth-century like Hanslick and Shaw, whose writings set the tone for the prevailing aesthetic of their time, and scholarly music critics of our own day such as Baldacci, Dent, Grout, Kerman, Carner, and Conrad, whose opinions have (for the most part) tended to be widely

divergent. The most evident perspective that each critic has brought to his view of *verismo* has been greatly colored by the prevailing *zeitgeist* of the time. In the case of Shaw and Hanslick, it was the ubiquitous influence of Wagner that set the critical standard. In Wagner's shadow, whatever elements redeemed *verismo* as a viable musical form, in the works of Mascagni, Leoncavallo, and Giordano notably, were either trivialized or cited in the name of musical interest, at best. The Wagnerian ethic was so manifest it prompted even Puccini to confess that "compared to Wagner, we are all mandolinists." Opinions with respect to *verismo* by more recent critics, on the other hand, have been influenced rather conspicuously by the movement of modernism and the prevailing *avant garde* musical trends of our day.

While opinions abound with respect to the relative worth of *verismo*, or lack of it, less is said about the decline and swift demise of the style. Early critics say practically nothing about it. Later ones, like Edward J. Dent, do no more than confirm the culmination of the form at the hands of Puccini. Few truly speculate on its demise. The major historians who do, like Grout and Budden, do so in a rather general way, never in depth. Grout, for example, alludes to the end of *verismo* by saying that Italian composers after 1900 became increasingly susceptible to current foreign influences. <sup>1</sup> He adds that

the reason good operas survive is due to the composer's ability to wed music to the libretto in a way that permits the music to operate as an effective partner in the projection of the drama...With the passing of fashion of *verismo* came other forms of composition which interested more and more Italian composers. <sup>2</sup>

Julian Budden amplifies on Grout's comment that contends the form went out of fashion. His own statement addresses the popularity of *verismo*. He argues, for example, that Mascagni and Leoncavallo

tended to veer from one type of subject to another, sometimes drastically overreaching their creative limitations...Verismo has maintained its longevity because of its melodic expressiveness. <sup>3</sup>

The statement carries some weight in its contention that *verismo* waned due to overdiversification on the part of its composers. (Baldacci, an Italian critic in post World War I Italy, was the first to refer to this diffusion of subject matter in later *verismo* opera as the *poetica del diverso*). One observes from Budden's remark the fact that he still regards *verismo* as alive even today.

Hagopian says the music publishers (mainly Sonzogno and Ricordi) were responsible for this so-called overdiversification of style:

An attribute of *verismo* is its short-livedness. It is owing to the rival attitudes of the publishers..[that] composers like Mascagni were urged to compose using a diversity of styles. <sup>4</sup>

But what did stylistic overdiversification mean? Like most of the *veristi*, Mascagni's output ran the gamut in its range of operatic subjects from melodrama (Cavalleria Rusticana), to chivalric romance (Isabeau), to satire (Nerone), to the adaptation of a best seller (Parisina), even to profane operetta (Le Maschere). Mascagni's output of sixteen works, therefore, yielded a "peacock" sampling of the diverse styles observed at the time. Mordden says "they constituted a survey of early twentieth-century Italian music drama in microcosm." <sup>5</sup> The salient point is that the demise of the *verismo* style occurred because of immediate changes observed in the style of *scuola giovine* composers, particularly in Mascagni and Leoncavallo. These changes embraced eclectic kinds of subject matter, <sup>6</sup> and they veered off in an altogether different direction from the familiar naturalist impulse that spawned the first real *verismo* works. The result was that, after the turn-of-the-century, Italian publishers all but gave up trying to dictate public taste in the direction of the earlier *verismo*. In the case of Ricordi, one witnessed a return to past methods vis-a-vis the promotion of Verdi's middle and later

operas now at the hands of Toscanini. All the later works of Puccini (except La Rondine) saw reinvigorated promotion, too. Not to be outdone, the firm of *Casa Sonzogno* reinstated new contests (there were six altogether) and ploughed into its promotion of not only Mascagni and Leoncavallo, but of Giordano, Franchetti and Zandonai.

After Iris and L'Amico Fritz in the 1890's, Mascagni's other success might have been Le Maschere (1901), an opera which dealt with the spirit of the *commedia*. It drew considerable yet short-lived attention for Mascagni when it opened in six cities simultaneously: Rome, Milan, Venice, Genoa, Turin, and Naples. Mordden remarks that the success in the Milan premiere was owing to Toscanini's presence in the pit and Caruso's onstage. <sup>7</sup> In the case of Leoncavallo, everything that came after Pagliacci could be said to be anti-climactic. As Ashbrook describes it,

Too much of the time he [Leoncavallo] was an unlucky opportunist. For instance, it is ludicrous that the same man who had proposed to write a trilogy after Wagner's Ring (Il Crepusculum, a project he left uncompleted) should also have composed an operetta called A chi la giarrettiera? (Whose garter is this?). <sup>8</sup>

Ashbrook adds that Leoncavallo's sense of proportion, a quality he lacked, contributed to his inability to cope with the rapidly changing trend in early twentieth-century Italian opera. In the case of Umberto Giordano, the attempt to ape the realist elements in the *post-verismo* operas of the time resulted in Siberia (1903). This opera treated of life in turn-of-the-century Saint Petersburg and the horrors of the Siberian labor camps. After Andrea Chenier (1896) and Fedora (1898), one observed little else of any substance.

Gabriele D'Annunzio was largely responsible for setting the tone in *post-verismo* opera. It is true that his literature (sensual, symbolic, and menacing) exhilarated the literary style of the time and reinvigorated the dying movement in Italian letters. But it also served to lead the *veristi* away from the mainstream. This is critical in the context

that D'Annunzio was a staunch supporter of Wagner and the fact that he strongly opposed *verismo*. He sought, instead, to encourage classical and pre-classical Italian opera. The operas of both Wagner and Monteverdi, therefore, played an important role in his creative writing. Of the many flaws in D'Annunzio's libretti, one of the biggest was their failure to conform neatly to the beginning-middle-end formula of the Puccini aria structure. <sup>9</sup>

This prompts the question: how much did the new ethic of the commercial play in the success of *verismo* opera? In a word, profoundly. It is no secret that the success of Cavalleria Rusticana and Pagliacci has largely been a public one. An indicator of this is the regard, or rather the lack of regard, that musicologists have had for these works. Indeed, Cavalleria Rusticana and Pagliacci have yet to earn a respectable place in musical letters. Giovanni Sgambati, the Italian Wagnerite who was one of the five judges of the Sonzogno competition that Mascagni won, said it all when he told the panel of judges regarding Cavalleria Rusticana, "Here is music that pleases the public!" <sup>10</sup> Eduardo Sonzogno, who promoted the opera, believed that if the ploy to enhance his company's standing had worked well twice before (in 1883 with Puccini and in 1888 with Mascagni), why not try it again? The prizewinner in 1892 yielded Pagliacci.

Whether one regards the operas as purely commercial or only partly so, it cannot be denied that the most self-conscious musical sequences in either Cavalleria Rusticana or Pagliacci represented the composers' honest sentiments. Freeman has observed that the operas owed their success to an *appropriateness* and *sincerity* that characterized good opera; in short, to their *inevitability*. <sup>11</sup> Cavalleria Rusticana, especially, seemed to be understood by the public on its own terms: namely, on terms that gave vent to what the composer felt, no apologies offered. With this opera, Mascagni realized that originality was not a matter of being different musically, but of being

himself. The fact was confirmed by critic Eduard Hanslick, who cited the opera's happy choice of subject (the story) and its appropriateness to the music:

we were especially impressed...Beyond doubt, the text of the libretto stimulated the most fervid side of Mascagni's talent...all was well motivated, natural, and realistic. <sup>12</sup>

Shaw himself praised Cavalleria Rusticana as "lively and promising" when he saw it played in London in 1892. <sup>13</sup>

It may have been due to Mascagni's youth that Cavalleria Rusticana evinced such freshness and explosive passion. Clearly, this appeal brought it immense favor with the public and constituted its strongest redeeming quality. Years later, Mascagni himself described what he felt was the secret of the opera's success:

in Cavalleria there is much humanity, and the passion is expressed with an impetus and fire which are the Sicilian temperament exactly. The secret of the opera's success consists precisely in this. <sup>14</sup>

After all this, it would seem bewildering to learn that the success of Mascagni's Cavalleria Rusticana was purely accidental. More than one musical historian has regarded the opera in precisely this way. <sup>15</sup> The work was a late entry in the publisher's contest. Moreover, Mascagni had decided at the last minute *not* to submit the opera at all. It was Mascagni's wife, Lina, who sent the score without the composer's knowledge. Mascagni revealed in his biography that

Sonzogno had the right to reject the opera. But partly because the package was sent anonymously, as the terms of the contest demanded (Sonzogno therefore had no way of knowing where to return the package), and partly because of Providence, the opera came to be added to the list of the other 72 contestants. <sup>16</sup>

### Observations on the Decline of Neo-Verismo

A number of affinities exist with respect to the decline of *neo-verismo* and that of the earlier *verismo*. For one thing, the decay in the Broadway musical theatre form of the time paralleled the declines in Italy. This decline impacted most notably upon the emergence of the realistic style observed in Menottian opera. One can argue, for example, that the realistic style was formed by the prevailing trends on Broadway at the time in much the same way that Verismo was the product of late Verdian opera.

Unlike the demise of Italian *verismo*, which was characterized by so much diversity, the slow demise of Menottian opera was largely due to the opposite condition, i.e. to the failure on the part of the composer to change his style, one, which by 1955 had become rather outdated in the public view and altogether obsolete in the view of the press. Menotti's was a style geared to reaching a broader public. It was highly tonal and descended from "a long and respected operatic tradition," in Grout's words. The voice was accorded a highly prominent role in his style, certainly a role more prominent than the orchestra's. It conveyed an *emotional realism*. Musically, Menotti's style was lean, powerful, self-generating and highly expressive. One recalled in his melodic phrases the arching *cantilena* lines of late Verdi (The Saint of Bleeker Street), the inventive simplicity of Schubert (The Medium), and the dramatic sumptuousness of Puccini (The Consul).

It is interesting, given the stylistic profile above, to learn that Menotti himself detested *verismo*.<sup>17</sup> Gruen's account relates that Menotti referred to Cavalleria Rusticana and Pagliacci in no uncertain terms as "vulgar" works.<sup>18</sup> More to the point, the composer loathed critics who were quick to associate the verisimilitude and action in his libretti with *verismo*. The association with *verismo* arose from the very beginning with Amelia at the Ball, Gruen tells us, and remained with each succeeding opera. Rather

than any link with *verismo*, Menotti preferred the term *emotional realism*, (mentioned above) which connoted something else entirely. The phrase addressed a much deeper involvement with subject and character. The aim was to go beyond merely telling a story, into the arena of symbolic significance. Menotti preferred to have the story be at the service of an all-embracing *idea*.<sup>19</sup>

Of the many redeeming features in Menottian opera, emotional accessibility has been one of the strongest and most appealing with audiences. After the manner of Puccini and Mascagni, Menotti guided the listener in a particular emotional direction. Emotional truth, Menotti believed, was equated with realism. It followed, then, that for the composer, at least, opera was the highest form of realistic theatre. This was an idea at the very foundation of his "Credo." As long as an opera bespoke clearly of a character's passions and showed its effects, then it qualified as realistic theatre.

Encapsulating this *emotional realism* were the melodies that seemed to sing themselves. Menottian recitative (known as *parlar cantando*) was advanced in relationship to the overriding prominence Menotti gave the human voice. Melody served as yet another strong redeeming quality that lent great personalty to his music, gave it the unique Menottian stamp.<sup>20</sup>

A third redeeming factor in Menotti's works was the way in which the libretto was brought into a unique partnership with the music. Some argued that the Menottian libretto often outdistanced his music in substance. Menotti took issue with this and defended the quality of his music. He countered that

My operas are either good or bad, but if their librettos seem alive and powerful in performance, then the music must share this distinction.<sup>21</sup>

He believed that a good litmus test was to

let anyone read one of my texts divorced from its musical setting to discover the truth of what I say.<sup>22</sup>

Only through his music could the libretto be illuminated.

Throughout the literature this writer has encountered the notion of *success* in Menotti's work and the importance placed on it as a motivating principle of his style. One can postulate that the success principle in Menotti emerged out of the business ethic of the Broadway musical. This is the case more often than not because Broadway works during the 1940's came to be viewed in terms of their financial well-being with the public-at-large, at the box office. Menotti himself held strong convictions about the success of his works. He felt, for example, that it was ironic he should be viewed as a success. As he put it, "the word success applied to my career becomes ambiguous...I am the first not to take it seriously." <sup>23</sup> He felt that in the context of much hostile invective and critical aspersions cast on his work, especially after The Saint of Bleecker Street, and even despite honest efforts carried out in the most noble artistic spirit, success had become meaningless. The view was not universally shared, of course. It was only the view of the composer and that of some of his critics. It is certainly not the view of his publisher, his colleagues, Menotti's performers, and most of all, the public. Amid these circles, Menotti continued to be regarded as tremendously successful.

It is important to point out that not all of Menotti's operas have been solely commercial successes. The Saint of Bleecker Street, for example, was hailed by the critics, but fell short of the mark commercially. "It ran on Broadway for four months and...was a labor of love." <sup>24</sup> The fact that Menotti's operas have travelled well has brought accusations from other composers that Menotti sold out on his art. They have regarded the success of his works the result of clever commercial manipulation. <sup>25</sup> In many ways, Menotti's publishing agent at G. Schirmer, Hans Heinsheimer, was largely responsible for the sweeping popularity Menottian opera came to enjoy, particularly

through the late 1940's. Heinsheimer recounts that, up until the time Benjamin Britten died in 1976, "he [Britten] was the only other current day composer to enjoy the same worldwide acceptance and popularity [accorded Menotti]." <sup>26</sup> It is to the point now that somewhere in the world, virtually every day of the year, a work by Menotti is performed. In this century, Ardoin tells us, only Puccini rivals Menotti in frequency of performance. <sup>27</sup>

From this one could easily make a case for Menottian opera based solely on its success. After all, The Medium was the first opera presented on Broadway to enjoy a long run, and the first to be recorded and filmed. Menotti was the only serious composer to have won both the New York Drama Critics' and Music Critics' Circle Awards, not to mention two Pulitzer Prizes (one each for The Consul and The Saint of Bleeker Street). And the list of awards, prizes, honors and commissions goes on and on.

The truth is that apart from his early critical success of The Medium and The Consul, his work has been as often damned as it has been praised. <sup>28</sup> In the early part of his career (throughout the 1940's and 1950's) this troubled the composer greatly. In the 1960's it caused him to be plagued by doubts and questions about his creative abilities. Late in life, however, Menotti has learned to take it all in stride. It has made him discerning about his place in American musical letters. He has learned to philosophize about his experiences. He told Gruen,

As for prizes, degrees and titles, how could one possibly ever take them seriously? What is one to think when a critic who declares you a "man without talent" receives the Pulitzer Prize -- the same prize which was conferred on you twice, supposedly for talent?...It has little meaning for me. For I see at the same time vulgar, tasteless productions in our major opera houses being praised to the sky. <sup>29</sup>

Menotti is hardly to blame for allowing the incentive of the commercial to be one of the primary motivators of his work. Who can hold against him the fortuitous success

that came his way and popularized his name? The truth is that Menotti's creative efforts, like those of Puccini, Mascagni and Leoncavallo, came to be largely dictated by the burgeoning business interests of the theatre world at the time. In Menotti's case, the cut-throat world of Broadway dictated his work. Through the 1940's, survival was the first basis upon which Broadway works were judged. For many, extended runs were critical before works could draw any sort of attention. Some of the greatest works of the time, Porgy and Bess, Street Scene and Oklahoma, drew either little or no attention on opening. The same can be said for The Medium. Audience response to this work was negligible at the start, despite opinions that here was good melodramatic theatre. Only after The Medium proved itself at the box office did critics seriously take note of its musical-theatrical value.

At the Metropolitan Opera, too, the cost and the popularity of productions influenced decision-making more than any concern for the future of the art form. Martorella says that such developments coincided with and became contingent upon the rise of a commercially-oriented industry.<sup>30</sup> Rolf Liebermann, former intendant of both the Hamburg Opera Company (which commissioned the premiere of Menotti's Help, Help the Globolinks in 1968) and the Paris Opera, defended the position of the composers like Menotti. He argued that opera composers generally had to contend with undeniable realities:

To begin with you must be effective. Then you can start to be philosophical...[You] cannot talk about your artistic "mission." If you have to produce an automobile, or whatever, you have to produce it for a price. It is exactly the same in opera. [The opera house] is an organization that sells opera performances.<sup>31</sup>

Performers attested to the economic realities of opera, as well. Jess Thomas (American heldentenor with the Metropolitan Opera in the 1950's under Rudolf Bing) admitted that, according to American standards, opera "was seen in terms of how much it made."<sup>32</sup> One

could hardly argue, therefore, with the factors that brought Menotti public popularity. Nor could one question his craft simply because his "product" happened to be highly salable in the commercial sense. There are a dozen comparable instances in Puccini, in which the commercial impulse was the primary motivator of the composer's work. For this reason, one can say that *verismo* shared a great deal in common with *neo-verismo*.

Menotti wrote for the audiences of his time. He knew the public. He knew why they went to the theatre. And his humanitarian instincts had a broad base. His numerous works for children, for instance -- Amahl and the Night Visitors, Martin's Lie, The Egg -- attested to only one part of a close kinship and a deep understanding of the public and its taste. It is unfortunate that the press and the managements of major houses failed to trust him because of his popularity with the masses, because of his intention to create and hold the public's attention. Owing to the recriminatory tone in the reviews of his critics after The Saint of Bleeker Street, Menotti began sensing a loss of faith on the part of his audiences. In 1974, The New York Times ran an article in which the composer commented, "I always had faithful audiences, but this is the case no longer." <sup>33</sup> Audiences had been an integral part of a two-way alliance Menotti believed should exist between performer (ergo, production) and viewer. Unlike the visual artist whose audience was ready-made once the painting or sculpture was perceived, opera depended on the complexities of a theatrical company for its realization. Thereafter, it depended upon audiences for its consumption and appreciation. It was not enough to merely conceive of an idea. The idea demanded that all-important communication with the viewer also.

There was something highly uncompromising about the public that reassured a composer, reinforced his artistic integrity, let him know who he was. It was the honesty and the basic common sense of the public. If audiences failed to like a composer's work,

after all, it was a simple matter of not coming back to see his later works. In modern opera, the public was a mighty agent in weeding out the esoteric, the pretentious, and the egocentric. Menotti honored the public, therefore, and he adjusted his operas to the tastes and needs of the time. This is precisely what gave his form of theatre an advantage over that of his rivals. Presumably, where a realistic work produced for audiences at the Metropolitan would have amounted to failure, on Broadway this same production was sure to find its true audience. Menotti's brand of realism provided the viewer with one of the most invigorating theatrical experiences of the time. He did more than involve the audience. He lured it in, brought it closer, all for the sake of making a production more believable, more real. The closer the tie was between the viewer and the character, the more meaning the drama assumed, the stronger the aesthetic pleasure was for the viewer. Hence, intimacy ran both ways: from singer-actor to audience and vice versa. In The Medium the performer-audience bond satisfied an aesthetic need. In The Consul it satisfied an intellectual-moral one, it enriched the outlook of the viewer.

Menotti's stand with audiences and his success with the public has also taken its toll on his convictions about his art. For years, Menotti was pained that in some way he inadvertently compromised his artistic integrity; that the motivating element of success assumed more of a prominent role in his artistic outlook than it should have. The inner struggle with this dilemma, i.e. the real virtues of opera versus the need to make it salable, became linked to a broader outlook Menotti held about art. On the one hand, for instance, he defended art's more worthy aspects by saying, "only my music means anything to me,"<sup>34</sup> and --

Must we come to the conclusion that art in America can be nothing but a commercial proposition?...In Europe opera and play producers are willing to take a chance with a new native work, even if they feel fairly certain that they'll lose money on it....After all, the people who first produced Carmen were also faced with a flop.<sup>35</sup>

On the other hand, he promoted the opposite argument, that "the first need of every composer is the need for money." <sup>36</sup> He asked, "why be afraid of donating money to music, and to opera in particular?" <sup>37</sup> Somewhere in between lay the kernel of the composer's true belief: namely, that art and the reality of commercialism needed to coexist if art, as opera, was to survive at all in the twentieth-century. Among Menotti's critics, this contention somehow grew out of proportion, becoming sadly distorted, with the result that after a time "success" became the chief negative criticism attached to most, if not all, of Menotti's work. The unfortunate thing is that such distortions gained great currency. In later years critical reviews became noticeably more vehement about the Menottian style. It was commonplace to observe the press's view, for instance, that since Menotti's work drew immense public acclaim, therefore it somehow lacked artistic merit. Such reasoning was highly suspect. Indeed, nothing could be further from the truth.

Because Menotti did not fit the mold then fashionable (particularly among critics of more recent times), typified by a belief that modernism represented the one true path in current-day music, any comprehensive regard for the depth of Menotti's artistic ability was dismissed or was sadly neglected. There was great resistance to the fact that there was more to Menotti than a mere triumph at the box-office. Menotti's own self-appraisal shed light on his creative ability:

I would say my talent is a torturous mountain stream which runs deeper than people think, too impetuous at times, too easy-flowing at others, but never swerves from its single-minded and constant search for the wider sea. <sup>38</sup>

All of this points to Menotti as an instinctive musician rather than an intellectual one. He never pretended to be a Boulez, or a Stockhausen, or a Sessions. He was to be appreciated and understood solely on his own terms, by his ability to vent what he felt with scant

premeditation and no apology. <sup>39</sup> Like Puccini and Mascagni, originality was not a matter of being different, or conforming to trends, but of being oneself, as humanly and honestly as possible. <sup>40</sup> You cannot do both, he said,

you cannot be a charming man and also a wonderful artist. You've got to be cruel with your life so that you can become a great artist....That is one thing that I wish I could because I love to be charming. That's why I will never be a great artist. <sup>41</sup>

Understandably, it pained him that later critics dismissed him so easily, so suspiciously, so simply as "facile." Colleagues spoke out on his behalf. Lehman Engel, well-known conductor on Broadway and in the concert hall in the 1950's, defended Menotti's sincerity by saying, "He is not concerned that the music in any way make a display of him as a composer." <sup>42</sup> Ned Rorem's opinion on Menotti's musical worth and the media was penetrating:

Likeability is a suspicious word in musical circles...The so-called musical intelligentsia disliked Menotti's music because it was immediately likeable. This is suspect...the reason Menotti was originally liked was for theatrical reasons... it was because Menotti was writing things that appealed to non-musical people. People remembered the tunes and all of that became suspect. Likeability became a suspect word in the fifties when the Boulezes of the world took over. Charm, grace...the essence that is Menotti... are villainous qualities in America. <sup>43</sup>

### **Menotti and the Critical View**

If Menotti felt strongly about audiences it was because the belief was endemic to his musical-theatrical philosophy. He practiced what he preached, artistically, despite the fact that what he preached did not always find receptivity with critics. His respect for audiences bespoke of his sensitivity to his medium. The bond between the Menottian performance and the public was reciprocal: the Menottian performer relied on the viewer's experience, and the viewer, in turn, was uplifted by the performer's art.

The respect Menotti had for the public emerged in his personal vendetta against privilege and modern elitism, tendencies of which were to be seen in the works of his contemporaries. Elitist attitudes were *anathema* to Menotti. Accessibility was an artistic choice that he was proud of, it was his way of reaching out to the viewer, his own personal humanitarian gesture. Art was not the province of the rich, nor a specialized message to the *aficionado*. It was there for all to enjoy. His aversion to modernism (or futurism) disguised his love for the *sentimental*. Granted, when carried to extremes, the *sentimental* in his work verged dangerously close to the maudlin, the meretricious. But he came to understand the importance of proportion. Undeniably, his roots were in late Puccini, in Mussorgsky, and in Debussy. The *sentimental* was, therefore, an indispensable ingredient of his musical personality. To deny it would have meant denying one of his most attractive instincts as an artist.

The stories Menotti told in his operas were not mythological, contrived, or historically-based. They were a part of the common human experience. In The Medium there was the dysfunctional family tyrannized by a drunken mother who abused her mute child and made her living by means of fraud. The drama of The Consul, as current as a daily newspaper, treated of modern-day political oppression and existential pessimism. The Saint of Bleeker Street told the story of a frail, afflicted young woman, of her brother and their quasi-incestuous relationship. The first and third works in particular were uniquely symbolic. They revolved around a conflict close to Menotti's heart, that of faith versus doubt.

In all his *oeuvre* Menotti emphasized a realism that modelled itself after *veristic naturalism* in more current-day terms. The acting of his performers proceeded out of the music, wherein the real spirit of the work lay. What Menotti refers to as emotional realism in The Medium was made to conform to a neo-gothic style of horror in modern

dress. It displayed the garb of Freudian introspection. The neo-gothic function found its basis in the distraught, contorted condition of the modern day mind. The dripping caves were no longer there. Neither were the damp-cold mansions on hills, the fog-gloomy nights, or the creaking stairways leading down darkened hallways. Neo-gothicism in Menotti focussed more on the psychological as the primary form of display. This bears a direct relation to similar concerns with the subjective and the inner psychological workings of a production; ideas which consumed Felsenstein's attention. Such ideas emanated directly out of Stanislavsky's principles, and in Menotti's hands the "subjective" took on new meaning.

One needs to ask -- what major obstacle contributed to Menotti's decline? What flawed his career? Some say it was Menotti's reluctance to change his style with the times. His colleagues say that his increasing involvement with The Spoleto Festival of Two Worlds was to blame for dissipating his energies and having compromised his art.<sup>44</sup> Others, like Henry Butler and John Ardoin, point to Menotti's compulsive nature coupled with the idea that he just generally ran out of time; that with the progress of his career, less time was available to edit scores and attend to the demanding, necessary revisions of these early works. They cite these points as his Achilles heel, his tragic flaw. The composer himself confessed that the older he got, the further away the dream of realizing his artistic goals had become. "His greatest enemy was time and his greatest sin was haste," Butler said of Menotti. The composer commented on this:

Hell begins on the day God grants us a clear vision of all that we might have achieved, of all the gifts which we have wasted, of all that we might have done which we did not do.<sup>45</sup>

He admitted that, unfortunately, there has always been less time and more haste to complete projects in progress, despite the fact that some of his most notable operas, like The Consul and Amahl and the Night Visitors, for instance, have been written in a state of

haste. <sup>46</sup> Last minute writing was to blame, he claimed, for what has been called his "unpolished, slipshod work":

I must admit that \*his frenzied writing does affect the precision with which I convey my thoughts to the written page. But not the conception and the core of my work, for if some of my works have been written hastily, they have been planned slowly and carefully. <sup>47</sup>

A work like The Medium could hardly be described as slipshod, however. This early work stands apart from all the rest in that it remains about as exquisite a musical theatre piece as one could hope for. The work grew, not out of haste, but out of a conscious, patient effort. From the first to the last, The Medium was a revitalizing type of theatre. It was sparsely scored, it made uncanny use of silences that punctuated vocal lines and allowed for great freedom of onstage interaction. And Menotti was at its helm. He made his debut as a director in The Medium.

The Medium was a vanguard work in that it raised opera to the same level of success as the musical. It held its own with Porgy and Bess, Oklahoma, and South Pacific. A large share of the critical commentary about The Medium, weeks after the premiere, revolved around the work's theatricality, its gripping drama, its newness. And, plainly, Menotti was given to pleasing his critics with this work. As with Puccini's first efforts with Edgar, Manon Lescaut, or La Boheme, The Medium represented Menotti's first deliberate attempt to find wide critical approbation. With Amelia at the Ball, The Old Maid and the Thief, and The Island God, the composer had merely tested the waters of his career. In The Medium, however, critics (particularly in the press) found what they had looked for in a Broadway work. Here was *integrated* theatre. The work had a tragic-serious tone, it shocked its viewers, its setting was topical, its language had a new ring to it, and its evocation of mood was easily traceable to both Rodgers and Kern. As a

musical play, therefore, it was hardly new. As opera or musical theatre, however, it was exceedingly fresh, innovative, substantive.

### **Survey of Criticisms of Menotti**

What basis have critics relied upon for their appraisals of *neo-verismo*? How has the worth or the merit of Menotti's musico-theatrical works been determined? Have judgements been made along purely operatic lines, or more in conformity with the standards of Broadway musical comedy? This writer has examined the opinions of various journalists and critics, including Winthrop Sargeant, Olin Downes, Virgil Thomson, and Irving Kolodin. Their contributions have appeared in such publications as The New York Times, The New York Herald Tribune (now defunct), The Saturday Review, The New Yorker, Musical America, The Musical Quarterly, Time and Life magazines, Catholic World, etc. The scholarly opinion of Joseph Kerman has also been cited in light of the impact that his book, Opera as Drama, made on opera of the time when it was first published in 1952, a pivotal year in Menotti's operatic activity. In all, the evaluations of these critics have varied, predictably, with greater or lesser emphasis placed on aspects of the music, the drama, the visual, the libretto, and/or the language.

It should be noted that this writer has been vigilant of writing which has sought to "knock down" the composer unnecessarily, for whatever reason, and of writing which has had the effect of mystifying the artistic worth of Menotti in any way. Instead, the writer has looked for fair-minded criticism; one which has combined high musical standards with an obvious knowledge of both theatre and opera; criticism which has sought to edify, rather than deprecate, the musico-theatrical form as a whole.

Winthrop Sargeant, review critic at the time for The New Yorker magazine, was highly approbatory of Menotti's work. He was often assigned to cover the composer and his reviews (there are four major ones from this period) made human interest the

primary focus, sometimes at the expense of a well-considered opinion. In an article in Life magazine dating from 1950 (the year of The Consul premiere), Sargeant commented that The Consul

fits the exigencies of a tense, melodramatic plot without seeming artificial or in any way getting in the way of the action...The Consul captures what many serious thinkers consider to be the great tragedy of the twentieth century: the plight of the individual overwhelmed by vast impersonal forces of machine-age organization. <sup>48</sup>

In the same article he commented also that

The Medium makes use of a curious mix of pathos, realism and eerie mysticism which were deeply impressive... <sup>49</sup>

Sargeant typified some American reporting at mid-century in that his observations assumed no definable artistic stance. His reviews occasionally relied too much on the "expert" opinion of others and were overly generalized. Like other theatre journalists of his day, Sargeant chose not to venture beyond drawing numerous references to the melodramatic in Menotti's work. While he did no real damage to the composer (quite the contrary, he was laudatory and expressed a sincere appreciation of Menotti), one came away only marginally informed about Menotti's style. Thanks to Sargeant, one learned what Menotti was like, but never what Menotti was about.

On the other hand, Olin Downes, critic for The New York Times, was an exceptionally discriminating observer. Downes' writing was balanced and, for the most part, thorough. He was usually clear and deliberate, and had no reservations about pointing out a work's shortcomings if they were called for, as he did about The Medium:

The Medium begins so badly that it seems hopeless. By the end of the second act, it has gripped the audience by means of its realistic musical theatre.

Like Sargeant, Downes also noted The Medium's melodramatic strain. Unlike Sargeant, however, he was quick to pinpoint its source:

The Medium is a chilling shocker with overtones of mystery, Freud and Grand Guignol. <sup>50</sup>

Downes qualified his criticisms by maintaining a perspective:

It is so ineffective in the first act because Mr. Menotti has written his own libretto. This, at least, is the only possible conclusion in the light of the evidence...So there was a success instead of a failure -- a success of good theatre and fluent theatrical composition...someday we ought to get a real opera from Mr. Menotti. <sup>51</sup>

It is evident that Downes assumed a moral outlook in his reviews. For example, he praised The Medium for its "straightforward humanity" and said it was "...a welcome note in contemporary operatic composition." <sup>52</sup> The literature also makes it clear that Menotti respected Downes' remarks, in large measure because he knew the reviewer understood the creative workings of his (Menotti's) compositional style. One recognizes this in Downes' remarks about The Saint of Bleeker Street, for instance:

Arias of both florid and sentimental variety, religious chants, dramatic recitatives, dissonant harmonies and -- as a welcome change of pace -- humorous ditties and satirical songs dexterously [*sic*] underscore every word of dialogue and every instant of action. <sup>53</sup>

With reference to The Medium, too, one gets the impression Downes knew what he was about:

As dramatic music, [The Medium was] emphatic in action as well as in feeling, and in essence song, [*sic*] which is what opera must be. <sup>54</sup>

Whenever Downes ventured a compliment, he was generous as well as judicious:

This opera [The Saint of Bleeker Street], as human drama and first rate theatre, gives one the feeling of a masterfully integrated whole. <sup>55</sup>

One can see by Downes' use of the term "integrated" (above) and his estimation about "what opera should be" that he based his judgements both on a musical theatre standard and on one that was more purely operatic. His musical descriptions displayed depth. Downes' real contributions, however, were his impartiality, his frankness, and his

grasp of the requisites of good opera in the context of good musical theatre. His reviews satisfied the reader's need to know what Menottian opera was like as well as what it was about.

The most well-informed of critics at the time was Virgil Thomson. Harvard-trained and a *protogée* of Boulanger in Paris, Thomson evidenced a total mastery of criticism. In his preface to The Art of Judging Music (1947), he outlined three preliminary steps in assessing a work. The first step consisted of listening to a work (obtaining a first impression), asking if the work held one's attention, and reflecting on the "aftertaste" or "the image the whole piece leaves in the mind for the first moments after it ceases to be heard." <sup>56</sup> At the next level, one became better acquainted with a work through a second, separate hearing. Here, Thomson claimed, "one has material for reflected judgement...and one formulates the judgement" <sup>57</sup> if one needs to, otherwise, one proceeds to the third and final level. This level consisted of revisiting the work, but only after "a period of rest, of vacation from the subject." <sup>58</sup> Thomson further maintained that no judgement was ever final or permanent. He judged a musico-theatrical work based on its design (versus its execution), its expressive power (as distinct from its musical interest), as well as the work's emotional effect (as opposed to a more purely meretricious one). With the possible exception of Olin Downes (Thomson's rival at The New York Times) and Andrew Porter later on (The New Yorker magazine), few of Thomson's colleagues were as thorough as he was in formulating judgements. Thomson's reviews satisfied the reader's curiosity on three distinct levels: what is the musico-theatrical work like? what is it about? and how does it go?

Accordingly, Thomson's appraisal of Menotti's The Medium was balanced and lucid. On its plot he said, "No reduction of the plot can give an idea of how absorbing this work is from beginning to end." On the libretto of The Medium, he stated that "Mr.

Menotti's libretto (which he wrote himself) and the music form a unit in the most satisfactory way imaginable." He addressed the element of shock in The Medium by saying that "the whole is deeply touching and horrifying." With respect to the *veristic* elements he defended, "if the second act is a little reminiscent as theatre (though not as music) of the second act of Puccini's La Tosca, the piece in no way suffers by comparison with that infallible piece of stage craft." <sup>59</sup> Finally, he pointed out that the singing-acting was exceptionally realistic, saying that "Particularly notable for both singing and acting were Marie Powers...and Evelyn Keller..."<sup>60</sup> On the production as a whole, Thomson commented:

The Medium is a first class musico-theatrical work...A tragedy in melodramatic vein that is the most gripping operatic narrative...witnessed in many a year. It wrings every heart-string and so does the music. <sup>61</sup>

Irving Kolodin's critical style followed in the Thomson tradition. His own particular influence was observed in the style of music critics of the later 1950's and 1960's. Classically grounded, Kolodin knew operatic history, operatic singing, and operatic style. He considered The Medium "rich in varied strands of dramatic purpose and musical color." <sup>62</sup> He said the opera had a characteristic "theatre look" atypical of other works. The offstage voices of The Medium coupled with the "unexpected light piercing gloom and the stifled scream in the dark" added up to Menottian *grand guignol*, he observed. He noted, too, that "the sudden stabs of dramatic effect were directly derived from Il Tabarro than from any other single source." Kolodin commended Menotti on his libretto for making English a worthy counterpart of his original language of Italian, adding that the composer's ability to build musical textures on sounds such as "Monica, Monica" became "another instrument in Menotti's total orchestra of effect." <sup>63</sup> In The Consul, Kolodin immediately pointed out strong contemporaneous features, and "its

relation to the here and now." This opera, said Kolodin, had "the impact of a stone thrown through a window, a shadow on a wall, a telephone which rings without being answered, played for all they are worth with or without music." <sup>64</sup> In The Saint of Bleeker Street, Kolodin drew upon musical analysis, citing that the arias have "a lateral rather than a vertical relationship" with the drama. They advanced the story, he said, "rather than being arbitrary episodes on behalf of a vocalist." He observed that Menotti's technique in The Saint of Bleeker Street represented "a substantial advance" on previous accomplishments:

the instrumental detail is richer, the Romantic fragments are sharper in contour, more recognizable in purpose... Something of the Strauss-Debussy-Wagner technique of underscoring was added to the Puccinian melodic impulse which lent the voice a preferential status. <sup>65</sup>

Menotti clearly benefitted from such carefully-worded notices in his early years. Kolodin was well-versed in twentieth-century technique and he understood late Romantic musico-theatrical style as well. He maintained that the Menottian style had a place in the modern day. It is apparent that Kolodin was critically honest with Menotti and that he gave tradition its due. His criticism was judiciously directed more at the grander Italian tradition out of which Menottian opera grew and less on the artist. He recognized that the past dictated the present and that the past was not to be ignored simply because it was no longer in fashion.

The influence of the past on the Menottian style was eloquently voiced, not by Kolodin, but by Harold Schonberg in The New York Times some fifteen years after the first signs of the decline of Menottian opera became evident. Schonberg said that

Menotti's career in some respects has been a sad one. He came up in the 1930's and 40's as one of the new heroes of opera. Frankly a romantic, writing in an idiom that went straight back to Puccini and Italian opera, he delighted international audiences with his works [he cites the early ones]...In those days, Wozzeck was just a vague word...Music critics of the 1930's and 1940's were, internationally, an aging lot whose roots were in the nineteenth century and who were happily prepared to accept Menotti's language...But after World War II the...old critics began to disappear, replaced by a younger lot who had much closer identification with the new speech. All of a sudden, Menotti was considered not only old-fashioned but hopelessly naive. His operas were contemptuously dismissed. This does not mean they disappeared...but, as a composer, Menotti was no longer taken seriously by the taste-makers...Many composers shifted their styles to conform to the new tastes...But Menotti defiantly continued to buck the trend, even though it got him nowhere, and works such as Maria Golovin (1958) and The Last Savage (1963) were stillborn. 66

The traditional element in Menotti, then, became the voice of the past finding an unreceptive ear among some critics of the present.

### **The Demise of Neo-Verismo**

Among the critical contributors who permanently altered the face of the traditional in American opera at mid-century was Joseph Kerman. This is to say that, sometime between 1954 and 1956, the life of Broadway opera, a theatrical form which the public had gradually come to know and appreciate, came to an end. It can be said that Kerman's book, Opera as Drama, first published in 1952 and reissued successively over the next four years, contributed, however indirectly, to the end of *neo-verismo*. Opera as Drama reflected the *zeitgeist* of the 1950's and took as its central point the primacy of music in the makeup of opera. It examined operatic drama in a highly structured way. In hierarchical fashion, it placed certain historically-regarded operatic works over certain others. It established a temple of operatic sanctity into which very few works were allowed admission. This exclusionary rigor was precisely what set the book apart,

gave it its visceral tone. In its latest revised form (1988), Kerman's book continued to draw attention, although it has been edited to remove some of the earlier vitriol.

Opera as Drama had a dramatic effect on Menottian opera; so dramatic, in fact, that the 1988 reissue, unlike the 1952 original, saw the removal of all references to Menotti. Kerman apologetically confesses in the preface to the revised (1988) reissue that

The final chapter has been cut, so as to omit *inter alia* an unduly shrill attack on the operas of Gian Carlo Menotti and a gratuitous wisecrack about Benjamin Britten; I have been hoping for a long time to be able to remove these *péchés de jeunesse* [youthful transgressions] from public view. <sup>67</sup>

The "youthful transgressions" Kerman alludes to above consisted of a blatant attack on Menotti's style. Kerman referred to Menotti as "banal,... a composer with no musical distinction." <sup>68</sup> The attack blamed Menotti for

affecting more than taste; he affected operatic composition...an entirely trivial artist, Menotti is mainly interesting on account of his highly successful exploitation of the bad old ways...Menotti is a sensationalist in the old style, and in fact a weak one, diluting the faults of Strauss and Puccini with none of their virtues. <sup>69</sup>

Kerman went on to compare Menotti with Puccini and Strauss, saying that the only perceivable relationship existed in the composer's "flair for the *épatant*." <sup>70</sup>

The Saint of Bleeker Street, arguably the most technically advanced of Menotti's three operas from the period, suffered the brunt of Kerman's attack. The author called

The Saint of Bleeker Street

the crudest of all Menotti's operas in dramaturgy and symbolism, the feeblest in musical invention, and the most slovenly in dramatic effect...Local color is smeared on with a putty knife, but it is vivid and suitably sordid..the one thing that seems real is the cheapness of Bleeker Street...American opera will build on something more solid...The Saint of Bleeker Street is sheer pretension. <sup>71</sup>

Kerman concluded the disparagement with an assault on Menotti's children's opera, Amahl and the Night Visitors:

Television opera, let us charitably hope, deserves a little better cornerstone than Menotti's Amahl and the Night Visitors.<sup>72</sup>

Clearly, Menottian opera had its flaws, but it remains arguable whether it deserved such caustic invective.

The foregoing prompts questions: did the prevailing operatic standard suddenly change at mid-century? Or did the norm of musical criticism come of age? Or both? And why did criticism assert itself so noticeably? Was it a response to a major advance in scholarship and critical thinking?

While it is true that realism, as the most conspicuous indicator of this changing standard, became a permanent fixture in contemporary opera, particularly in the college opera workshop setting, it failed to invade the major commercial opera house to the same degree. A case has already been made for the way in which standards in the American opera house remained at "museum" status through the 1940's and early 50's, much as they had been previously. A case has been made also for the fact that whatever changes in standards surfaced, did so as a result of realism finding a lasting place, once and for all, in the performance setting, displacing, or more to the point, retiring, the old musical speech: i.e. the outmoded, the once-fashionable in grand opera. Not long after, as American regional opera gained currency with the public (notably at the hands of former European coaches and directors who by now held strong positions in American academia), one witnessed the telling acceptance of a new, realistic musico-theatrical language. *Modernism* became the promotional buzz-word among journalists and *litterateurs*, and not only with respect to the twentieth-century symphonic hall, but in the opera house of the time as well. In the eyes of more than a few critics and scholars, such a movement

represented the coming wave of *futurism*, or so it seemed. The more universally-held opinion of audiences, on the other hand, revealed something else entirely. The *avant garde* in opera, as music, was not only harsh, dissonant, and gnawing on the senses, it was an altogether incomprehensible language. Stravinsky had proven this rather well in Europe some years earlier with Oedipus Rex (1927) and L'Histoire du soldat (1928). Aggravating the situation even more was the idea that if, as Kerman contended, music held the place of choice in the union of word, music, and drama, it would be a while before the lay American listener, as yet in his musical infancy, was made to accept the vicissitudes of this new language. It became a far easier thing for audiences to revel in the nearly-modern, the *quasi-avant garde*. And on this account, no one was better suited than Menotti. Audiences knew it; the composer knew it. The critics, on the other hand, had their own unique turn of mind.

Kerman believed that the composer was to be assessed as musical dramatist. Only the composer who used music in a singleminded way to propose, elucidate, develop, and complete (or even transcend) a drama was worthy of consideration. Any lesser engagement with opera was a hostile one. This included the courting of effect, either theatrical or purely vocal, for effect's sake. This was Kerman's standard. Menottian opera thus found itself at the mercy of such a standard, namely the composer's ability to "wed" the music to the libretto in a way that permitted the music to operate as an effective partner in the projection of the drama. As for Menottian opera, Grout summed it up when he unapologetically asserted that

it is not necessary to make extravagant claims for Menotti's musical originality in order to recognize that he is one of the very few opera composers on the contemporary scene who thoroughly understands the requirements of the theatre and is making a consistent, sincere attempt to reach the large opera-loving public; his success is a testimonial to the continuing validity of a long and respectable operatic tradition. 73

## Notes to Chapter Six:

- 1 Donald Jay Grout, A Short History of Opera (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), p. 508.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 438, 508.
- 3 Julian Budden, "Italy: Puccini and the Period 1890-1910" in New Grove History of Opera, ed. Stanley Sadie (Basingstroke: Macmillan, 1989), p. 269.
- 4 Viola Hagopian, "Italy: Art Music, Twentieth-Century" in New Grove Dictionary of Music, vol. 9 (New York: Macmillan, 1980), p. 379.
- 5 Ethan Mordden, Opera in the Twentieth Century: Sacred, Profane, Godot (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 73.
- 6 This eclecticism is evident in the more general decadence of Italian art at the time.
- 7 Mordden, Opera in Twentieth Century, p. 76.
- 8 William Ashbrook, "Leoncavallo" in The New Grove Dictionary of Music (New York: Macmillan, 1980), p. 673.
- 9 Such a formula, according to Mordden, proved commercially convenient in that it allowed arias and ensembles to fit rather compactly onto a ten-inch 78 rpm disc. *Recondita armonia* (Cavaradossi's aria from *Tosca*) and *Donde lieta* (Mimi's aria from *La Boheme*) serve as examples. The electronic medium, then in its infancy, was a strong influence in the promotion of *verismo*. Mordden, Opera in Twentieth Century, p. 75.
- 10 David Stivender, Mascani (White Plains, NY: Pro-Am Music Resources, 1988), p. 62.
- 11 John W. Freeman, "Two Views on Verismo" in Opera News, 30 March 1953, p. 4.
- 12 William Weaver, The Golden Century of Italian Opera (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1980), p. 205.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 John Stivender, "Roads to Rome" in Opera News, 18 January 1975, p. 11.
- 15 Budden and Bastianelli hold this belief. Tuscan critic, Bastianelli, was one of the first to voice this contention when he said, "*verismo* was given to *Cavalleria* purely and simply by chance." Weaver, The Golden Century, p. 207-8.
- 16 Stivender, "Roads to Rome," p. 12.
- 17 John Gruen, Menotti (New York: Macmillan, 1978), p. 222.
- 18 The element in *verismo* that Menotti detested and had great aversion to is what he called, "a photographic copy of reality."
- 19 Gruen, Menotti, p. 222.
- 20 John Ardoin, "A Welcome Gift" in Opera News, June 1981, p. 9.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 Gruen, Menotti, p. 193-94.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 123.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 229.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 206.
- 27 Ardoin, "A Welcome Gift," p. 9.
- 28 *Ibid.*
- 29 Gruen, Menotti, p. 194.
- 30 Roseanne Martorella, The Sociology of Opera (New York: J.F. Bergin Publishers, 1982), p. 42.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 84.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 85.
- 33 John Gruen, "When the Critics Damn You" in The New York Times, 14 April 1974, p. 1.

- 34 Ibid., p. 17.
- 35 N. Landsdale, "Menotti Calls the Met a Museum" in Theatre Arts 36, May 1952, p. 30.
- 36 Martorella, Sociology of Opera, p. 157.
- 37 Landsdale, "Met Museum," p. 30
- 38 Ardoin, Menotti, p. 15.
- 39 Ibid., p. 12.
- 40 Ardoin, "A Welcome Gift," p. 9.
- 41 Edward Rothstein, "Sic Transit Goya" in The New Republic 196:4, 26 January 1987, p. 28.
- 42 Lehman Engel, The American Musical Theatre: A Consideration (New York: n.p., 1967), p. 151.
- 43 Gruen, Menotti, p. 80.
- 44 Gruen, "When Critics Damn You," p. 17.
- 45 Ardoin, Menotti, p. 14.
- 46 Ardoin, "Welcome Gift," p. 16.
- 47 Gruen, Menotti, p. 218.
- 48 Winthrop Sargeant, "Wizard at the Opera" in Life, 1 May 1950, p. 91.
- 49 Ibid., p. 90.
- 50 Olin Downes, in text of J.M. Brown, "Seeing Things," Saturday Review 30, 31 May 1947, p. 22.
- 51 Gruen, Menotti, p. 61.
- 52 Downes, in Brown, Saturday Review 30, p. 22.
- 53 Olin Downes, in David Ewen, David Ewen Introduces Modern Music, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Chilton Book Co., 1969), p. 270-71.
- 54 Downes, in Brown, Saturday Review, p. 22.
- 55 Gruen, Menotti, p. 123.
- 56 Virgil Thomson, The Art of Judging Music (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947), p. 4.
- 57 Ibid., p. 5.
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 Ibid., p. 128.
- 60 Ibid., p. 129.
- 61 Ibid., p. 128.
- 62 Irving Kolodin, "Amelia to the Saint," Saturday Review 38:28, 8 January 1955, p. 39.
- 63 Ibid.
- 64 Ibid.
- 65 Ibid.
- 66 Harold Schonberg, The New York Times, 1969, in Gruen, Menotti, p. 189.
- 67 Joseph Kerman, Opera as Drama, ed. revised (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. x.
- 68 Joseph Kerman, Opera as Drama (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956), p. 265.
- 69 Ibid., p. 264.
- 70 The flair for shocking the public.
- 71 Kerman, Opera as Drama, p. 265-66.
- 72 Joseph Kerman, Opera as Drama, p. 266.
- 73 Grout, SHQ, p. 545.

## Chapter Seven

### Observable Characteristics of Neo-Verismo

Are there certain characteristics that have emerged from the foregoing study?

Are there enduring components that have characterized both *verismo* and *neo-verismo*?

Unqualifiedly, the answer is yes. The common points in the comparison show that the similarities outweigh the differences, particularly with respect to the factors that spawned *verismo*.

What has been learned from an examination of *neo-verismo*? Precisely that Menottian opera, as the chief exponent of *neo-verismo*, shares a very close kinship with the past in terms of the meaning and significance of the genre. Whatever appreciation of Menotti's style one comes away with needs to be taken in the context of the style of late nineteenth-century Italian opera. This writer believes, therefore, that a historical retrospective serves as a good basis for a final argument of Menotti's three works.

Three universal factors emerge from the study of *neo-verismo*: the perpetually-current factor, identified as naturalism or realism; the *contemporaneous* factor, or the topical element; and the *sensationalist* factor, or melodrama. Each factor addresses a feature peculiarly endemic both to Menottian opera and to late nineteenth-century *verismo*. The factors should be seen in the light of their greater significance, as archetypal indicators. Admittedly, one or even all of these factors may be observed in Verdian opera, in Expressionist opera, as well as in manifestations of the operatic form of more recent times. But the common factors seldom appear in these other manifestations to the same degree. It is both the quantitative and the qualitative aspects of these common elements, therefore, that make them especially intriguing in terms of the comparison.

This writer identifies these universal factors in order to affirm the significance and the greater implication of the comparison/parallel with *verismo*: namely, that there

was an overwhelming acceptance of *verismo* and *neo-verismo* by the public, despite the absence of a comparable acceptance among critics and historians of the time; that *neo-verismo* represents the latter part of a much larger transitional link between the end of late Romantic Italian opera and modernist opera; and that *neo-verismo*, like *verismo*, on the whole looked backward rather than forward in form and in style. In other words, the writer tries to affirm that the genre of *neo-verismo* was firmly rooted in tradition, as *verismo* itself had been. One could say that the *veristi* composers stood in the same relation to Menotti as Verdi had to Puccini. It is this writer's hope that an examination of the three factors, the *perpetual*, the *sensational*, and the *contemporaneous*, will shed light on the reason why audiences and critics responded in such disparate ways to the genre.

#### **The Perpetually Current or Realist Factor**

Of the three factors cited above, realism, or the realist factor, manifests itself in Menottian opera in terms of universal characteristics. One can say, for instance, that this universality is present in the works of Euripides, Shakespeare, Ibsen, and Miller. This factor is quite distinct from naturalism. Rather, the human being and the audience are able to relate directly to the event that they are seeing. This universal factor is capable of touching any member of the audience. In other words, the spectator relates to what he sees given his own framework of experience. Such universality is something that exists in and is true about all great drama.

In purely dramatic terms, and unlike naturalism, the notion of realism has stood for a broad ideal. Unlike naturalism, it is more inclusive in scope as well as in concept. In some respects, the unsettling revelations that realistic theatre has brought on vis-a-vis the attention drawn to social issues has verged on heresy. Realism has shattered mores and prevailing codes of social behavior. In other ways, too, realism has been

generally less concerned with the literal expression of reality onstage than with the translation of that reality into dramatic terms, particularly regarding human relationships.

The aim of realism is and has always been the reproduction of typical people in typical surroundings. The early guiding principles of French theatre point to the fact that art must truthfully depict the real, physical world; that truth can be attained only through direct observation (a holdover ideal from the Enlightenment); and that the observer must strive to be impersonal and objective. <sup>1</sup> Diderot, the French encyclopedist, urged playwrights to deal with the persons and situations of everyday life. And he urged actors to develop a natural, life-like style. <sup>2</sup> This has had the bewildering effect of exposing the fine line between realism and naturalism, of course, especially with respect to the movements of Darwinism, determinism and nineteenth-century socialism, the absorbing interest in psychological phenomena, and the protest against the excesses of Romanticism. However, one can argue for the significance of realism over that of naturalism by citing that, unlike the adherents of the latter, the realists believed that humankind was ultimately responsible for its own suffering and redemption. In the healthiest sense, realism has broken the shackles of tradition and served to introduce an exuberant spirit into drama, linking the stage not only with the literature of the time, but with life as well.

Realism in American opera has had a similar, major (though perhaps not as profound) significance. Boetzkes says that

the realistic form...[which] evolved in the USA...further developed the formal heritage of the neo-romantics, expressionists and constructivists. During the Depression it was capable of strong social criticism...It came to exert a vital and lasting influence on American musical theatre, above all on musical comedy but also on opera and ballet, as stage designers...and artists staged their varied musical-dramatic subjects through a rich diversity of forms...<sup>3</sup>

Beginning with late-nineteenth-century opera, heavy stress was laid on the choice of realistic subject matter and its dramatic treatment. Strict attention was paid to accuracy, especially in the case of historically-derived subjects, down to such minor details as stage props.

The realist movement has also had the hardy effect of inciting countercurrents in the musical theatre of the time. Reactional developments surfaced owing to the fact that extreme realism of staging often obscured what was called "good theatre," or at least, what good theatre was at one time. Argument had it that realistic staging left too little to the imagination, that it steered the viewer away from the Romantic world of the fairy tale, the fantastic, and the mysterious. This caused some opera directors, and many more opera designers, to argue that a stark theatrical realism was a style unsuitable to opera.<sup>4</sup> The notion was frequently defended with the argument that

To the average opera theatre-goer, opera is the least realistic of all stage forms. To hear characters sing their conversation, frequently repeating it several times; to see performers who are not of complete visual credibility; to follow stories of gods and demons, or of fratricide and unassailable virtue -- such is the wonderfully foolish substance of opera, and surely no part of it can be called realistic. <sup>5</sup>

Harry Horner, former designer with the San Francisco Opera Company in the 1940's and 50's, commented that

we have come to accept all unrealistic theatre -- namely, opera -- as a "style" theatre, whereas realism itself is only a single theatrical style varying in its degree of verisimilitude from one generation to another. <sup>6</sup>

This argument that a stark theatrical realism was a style unsuitable to opera was effectively countered by Gian Carlo Menotti. In his three *neo-veristic* works, Menotti proved that American opera could be as realistic as a Broadway show and that music need not be a deterrent to realism, but that, in fact, music was in a position to heighten it. Dr. Kenneth Schuller qualified this fact *pro* Menotti when he observed:

our Broadway productions demand from the performer the same dramatic verity as does *veristic* opera. At times the American theater goes even further in this respect, and the dramatic ability of the performer frequently becomes more important than his ability as a singer. <sup>7</sup>

It is important to realize that Menotti accorded music an equal, if not a primary, place with drama. He believed that opera had to be not just good theatre, dramatically, but visually convincing theatre, as well. Fundamentally opposed to the notion of routine, "theatrical" acting, he worked for realistically persuasive productions. Stage settings and language adhered to the whole. His sets became an organic part of his productions. They played along, so to speak. His texts evoked a mercurial affinity between viewer and performer. As his own stage director, Menotti reintroduced the element of believability to opera (some say that he really introduced it for the first time). In all, he made the form palatable and attractive all over again after it had become too *avant garde*, musically, too difficult to accept. And he did it by allowing music to evoke the inner personality of the drama, by musically intensifying the dramatic situation.

Even though Menotti himself maintained that his works were more symbolic than realistic, there is little argument that they were rooted in the realist tradition. There has been a general failure to observe that, apart from his good stories, or the fact that his operas were memorable, or that his operas were uniquely entertaining, Menotti's works engendered values; they took a moral stand. The Medium, in particular, was dominated by the philosophical idea of the examination of the nature of faith. What did the cold hand in the dark signify? What did the terrible gesture of terror stand for? Was it accidental, a delusion, a penance for the guilty? The philosophical truth was that Baba would never know. The memory of fear drove her beyond reason into violence. Fear compelled her to sell out her chance for peace or intelligent disbelief. She became the victim of her own fraud. This frightening scenario was not an idea merely intended to

scare the young. It was meant to pique the viewer's interest and curiosity about the greater question of the mortal versus the spiritual life, about one's moral behavior. Aside from the obvious melodramatic impulse that framed the concept, then, one perceived the field of realistic tragedy in the work.<sup>8</sup> The tragic theme was morally-derived. It had a genuine link with realism.

In The Consul, Menotti also made it possible for one to view an equally real and tragic story in political-moral terms. This tale was based on a true account of an immigrant woman in the 1940's who hanged herself in Ellis Island after being denied reentry into the United States. Her husband, who had lived in Chicago, had testified that he had divorced her some time before on grounds of desertion. The woman, who had arrived from Poland with her daughter, declared that she had received no such notice of the divorce which her husband claimed he had sent to her. The man agreed to accept his daughter, who was admitted on that basis, but his former wife was excluded by a vote of an Ellis Island board of special inquiry.<sup>9</sup> The event was one among many similar realistic issues confronting the recovering post-war world. The politico-moral implications of the incident affected Menotti deeply, and the need arose to express the effect in musico-theatrical terms. The product was The Consul.

In The Saint of Bleeker Street (and in one notable later work, The Leper, a play) Menotti wrestled with doubt and spiritual unrest, a condition besetting virtually everyone at some point in life. Menotti confessed that an all-consuming guilt had been the driving force behind this opera. Guilt had been brought on by a strict Catholic upbringing. In his youth, the concept of sin and retribution had left an indelible impression on the composer. In The Saint of Bleeker Street, the element of faith (in contrast to that of doubt in The Medium) became the antidote to guilt and it informed the actions of his characters. Menotti shared with his listeners his examination of faith from

a secular perspective. Faith thus assumed a preemptory position in his life during the early 1950's. It became a very real spiritual value and it had sufficient meaning to impel him to base an opera on the concept of faith. There was no other work quite like it at the time. In the vocabulary of realism, The Saint of Bleeker Street voiced a moral statement. It addressed a common, real issue: secular, humanistic faith.

Creative inspiration came in many ways for Menotti, in real life and through art. He believed that "if human beings gain wisdom through living, they can also gain it through art, for art is in large measure organized experience that people share together." The quest for beauty and aesthetic truth was, therefore, manifested in Menotti's entire output, not only in the works that succeeded. <sup>10</sup> Like some of the most noteworthy realist playwrights of the past, he was not afraid of telling the truth on the stage. Menotti held a conviction, as Ibsen once had, that art should be a source of insight, something more than mere entertainment. In this sense, his views were strongly in keeping with the heritage of the realist credo in theatre.

### **The Contemporaneous Factor**

The most timeless element of *neo-verismo* took the form of contemporaneity. In truth, Menotti went even beyond the concept of the topical and contemporaneous. He wedded both the temporal and the timeless in his work. This was one of the central points that made the composer traditional. It was precisely what made him of his own time and place. Menotti maintained that "just as modern poets have been moved to examine and interpret the uniquely contemporary life, there is no reason why the composer should not do the same." <sup>11</sup>

The composer was very conscious of the main current and, therefore, well-grounded in tradition in the most fundamental sense of the word. He merged with the consciousness of the past and developed it. In applying contemporaneous technique to his

work, Menotti was following a direction that had been traditionally taken by most composers since the 1920's. This direction involved

scenic contemporaneity...[which] frequently required set accoutrements [such] as the telephone or the motor car and factory or railway station sets. 12

More importantly, Menotti drew his musical vocabulary from Italian opera. His librettos in particular, based on contemporary situations, were derived from Italian opera. Thereafter, his stories were brought into conformity with the style of the fluid, fast-paced legitimate theatre.<sup>13</sup> He knew, for instance, precisely what contemporaneous elements in Charpentier's Louise characterized its realism: the bourgeois family supper, the reading of a newspaper, the scene in the dressmaker's shop, and the characters "taken from life" who sang in a marked Parisian dialect. <sup>14</sup> Mascagni's opera, Cavalleria Rusticana, shared this same distinction. And despite the fact that he detested comparisons of his work drawn to Mascagni, Menotti's own *neo-verismo* was also delineated along "concepts that were absolutely modern...[his] dramatic actions sprang and spread solely from the situation, and not according to the old pattern of construction on the aria," <sup>15</sup> as Eduard Hanslick had once observed about Mascagni's opera in 1891.

The contemporary settings familiar to *verismo* in the form of celebratory scenes -- Christmas eve at the Cafe Momus in La Boheme, the mass and the Te Deum in Tosca, the interior Easter mass and Regina Coeli in Cavalleria Rusticana, the *commedia* call to the audience in Pagliacci -- such similar elements were present in Carmela's wedding scene in The Saint of Bleecker Street. In The Consul there was something equally contemporaneous, as well as serious: the mood of the modern period. It grew out of

a sense of homelessness, uncertainty and faithlessness in a world adrift against which there occasionally came the insistence that faith was possible. <sup>16</sup>

The moral, quasi-existential tone of the topical setting for The Consul brought it closer to the time, made it accessible to the modern viewer. The setting had the effect of exposing the causal forces of the action, it was the affective source that molded and shaped the characters. The opera affirmed the belief held by Menotti and his colleagues, individuals like Leopold Sachse, that "the style of any production should be contemporary." <sup>17</sup> With The Consul and The Saint of Bleeker Street Menotti was ministering to tradition. He was continuing a quest begun years earlier for a new expressive means. Menotti was looking back to Diderot, once again, who was one of the first to suggest that only contemporary life and manners could be observed directly. <sup>18</sup> And through his musical drama Menotti was observing human existence in its relation to an age. The Consul proved to be Menotti's interpretation of an epoch, his view of the cultural milieu of the time. In the old tradition of the *veristi*, Menotti eagerly watched the contemporary dramatic theatre for subjects suitable for his libretti.

#### **The Sensationalist Factor: Melodrama**

Of the three universal factors cited, the melodramatic impulse, the most primary of impulses in virtually every good playwright, was at once the most critically contentious and the one chiefly responsible for Menotti's success. But one may ask, what redeems melodrama?

One of the oldest standing arguments in defense of melodrama was offered by Aristotle, who maintained that the essential appeal of melodrama was its *catharsis*, or its ability to expiate tears. With unusual penetration, Eric Bentley elaborated on Aristotle's idea and posited that

Having a good cry implies feeling sorry for oneself; and pity is self-pity...self-pity has its uses...it is a very present help in times of trouble, and all times are times of trouble. <sup>19</sup>

In philosophical terms, then, a moral *raison d'être* lay at the bottom of the melodramatic experience:

Essentially speaking, one is...sorry for oneself, [as] deprived...and in the background is the fear of one's own death. <sup>20</sup>

But pity was only half the appeal, according to Aristotle. It represented melodrama's weaker side. The other half was fear. When joined together, pity and fear shared an intimate kinship. In tragedy, their functions became distinct:

If it is we who are threatened, we feel fear for ourselves; if it is others who are threatened, we feel pity for them...and most pity is self-pity. We are identified with those who are threatened; the pity we feel for them is pity for ourselves; and by the same token we share their fears. <sup>21</sup>

It is precisely here, in the fact that "fear becomes the most indestructible of obstacles," that the universality of melodrama lies. <sup>22</sup>

Bentley then pointed to two peculiar tendencies unique to melodrama: exaggeration and the use of language. In the wrong hands, he said, these tendencies assumed the most corruptive qualities in art. Exaggeration could make melodrama look foolish, empty of feeling (Bentley held that only intensity of feeling justified formal exaggeration in art). At its best, exaggeration had the potential of becoming the "Naturalism of the dream life." In dreams, everyone becomes the ham-actor, everyone is given to exaggerating gestures, grimaces and declamatory speech. <sup>23</sup> Language, too, was capable of being vulgarized through particular use, or it could be elevated. And in Bentley's view, the elevated rhetoric was the only "legitimate and inexorable demand of melodrama." <sup>24</sup> He illustrated the point by comparing Balzac to Shakespeare:

Modern persons will attribute Balzac's failure to the absurdity of the incidents: he piles on the agony till we smile. Yet this diagnosis cannot be correct -- Shakespeare piles on as much agony and we do not smile. The failure is only one of a tired rhetoric that no longer gives to the events and situations sufficient support. <sup>25</sup>

Bentley finished his argument by observing that if there was a moral side to melodrama, Shaw had identified it when he said, "the morals of melodrama is [*sic*] the projection upon the world of our irresponsible narcissistic fantasies." <sup>26</sup> This is not to imply that Shaw held the name of melodrama in honor, but Shaw did honor the melodramatic element in opera:

Shaw enjoyed opera as a form of theatre...and he entered enthusiastically into just those libretti which the twentieth century has decided are so much bosh -- such as the libretti for Rigoletto and Il Trovatore. <sup>27</sup>

Attention has already been drawn to one of the most biting polemics against the melodramatic element in Menotti, put forth by Joseph Kerman. Professor Kerman maintained that Menotti disimbanced the music-drama equation, saying that the aesthetic breach was not too different from the one perpetrated by Puccini in his opera, Tosca. Kerman pointed out that

it is scarcely believable that such a play [*La Tosca*] would have held the stage...or that it would have become a criterion with poetic drama...The really insidious error is the idea that Puccini's banality and Sardou's could somehow excuse one another and elevate each other into drama. <sup>28</sup>

Then, by way of comparison, Kerman pointed out that Menotti's music assumed a secondary rather than a primary role to drama. He said that Menotti's music failed to articulate dramatic action, thereby lowering the artistic quality of his work to such a point that his style was meretricious, banal, indeed, no less than melodramatic.

In defense of the composer, however, one of the strongest laudatory comments pertained to Menotti's mastery of theatrical atmosphere. <sup>29</sup> Another, from Olin Downes, cited his superior application of mystery, Freud and *guignoi*. <sup>30</sup> Ardoin praised The Medium as a "symbolic" work and said "it had the unchanging ability to charge our emotions and incite our imagination." <sup>31</sup> In all, the melodramatic impulse in Menotti met with both praise (from the press) and censure (from scholar-historians).

Menotti was well aware of the immediate effect that melodrama had on audiences. This is not to concede that he abused it. In fact, if anything, Menotti first used it as a means of unearthing his personal style and for no other reason.

No less notable a critic than Eric Bentley acknowledged melodrama's bad name:

Melodrama has a bad reputation -- and that is the worst thing a word can have in the theatrical world. [The] bad reputation [evolved out] of the popular Victorian melodrama. <sup>32</sup>

Melodrama's common ascription of being a fast-moving, violent event that emphasized good over evil through the heroism of stock-types was not applicable to Menotti. Rather, Menotti gave his private material a public and recognizable form, one that made art out of fantasy and pain, one that found a link with emotion and civilized values. <sup>33</sup> In short, Menotti sought to bring out the best in the melodramatic experience.

In Menotti, melodrama corresponded to the realism and contemporaneity of his world. The melodramatic urge was a natural instinct in him. It was elemental to his style. It allowed him to see things in an uninhibited, spontaneous way. Put another way, the composer's impulse to write melodrama was the impulse of youth. And yet, however imaginative his work may have been in the eyes of the public, it failed to qualify as thoroughly mature in the critics' view. It fell short of complete acceptance. It is possible that one could interpret the critical view as saying that Menotti's coarse, unrefined feelings revealed no more than an unseasoned artist. What may have been missing, in the view of historians, was a total mastery of the art of operatic writing. On the one hand, Menotti's operas became sensational partly as a consequence of their enthusiastic reception by a sensation-loving public. On the other, as far as critics were concerned, feeling was not enough. The Menottian formula lacked an important intellectual quality.

One can speculate that it was Menotti's theatrical contemporaries, O'Neill, Hellman, Odets, Williams, Miller, or even Ionesco, who influenced his melodramatic

style, but this is unlikely. From the start, Menotti was rooted in tradition of opera. He admitted that nothing in theatre could be as exciting as the amazing quickness with which music could express a situation or describe a mood.<sup>34</sup> Had he taken more care to check the melodramatic impulse in his work, according to critics, it might not have overtaken an otherwise sound musico-theatrical foundation.

All this prompts a final question: why is it not fair to judge Menotti's operas based on the melodramatic experience alone? Because doing so ignores the broader artistic implication which says Menotti was attuned to his time. His works, for better or worse, were exemplary models that manifested the chief Broadway influences of the day. As Broadway fare, there is no doubt that Menotti's operas held their own, artistically. To assert that his output from this period epitomizes little more than melodrama is to ignore the power of his characterization, or his singular ability to develop the atmosphere of his works, as well as to deny the beauty of his language. And finally, to do so would overlook the fact that Menotti remained faithful to his artistic potential, such as it was. He followed a natural inclination, one rooted in the Italian tradition, which demanded an honest and sincere representation of dramatic detail enhanced by music of a highly personal sort, unclouded by stylistic extremism, cliché, or mimicry. As a theatrical experience, then, Menotti's operas touched people's lives deeply, genuinely. The realism in Menottian opera promoted a deeper understanding of ourselves, contemporaneity made the operas relevant to the moment, and the sensationalist in them purged the human spirit.

#### **In Defense of the Traditional in Menottian Opera: An Evaluation**

T.S. Eliot, in his essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," (1919) argues convincingly in favor of the traditional merits of art in prose and poetry. While Eliot defends the enduring, traditional worth of the literary arena, the present writer applies

these similar fundamentals to the theatrical arena, i.e. to Menotti's place in the arena of musical theatre. <sup>35</sup>

The jury is still out, figuratively speaking, with respect to Menotti's standing in American opera. While most current indicators largely favor the composer, it is to be hoped that the equalizing effects of time will temper the somewhat harsh and undue opinion about his work. At the very least, Menotti's ability deserves a fair appraisal. It will be an even longer while, to be sure, before operatic history accurately assesses Menotti's place in the larger scheme of things. It should be an expeditious task, though, for the indicators of the Menottian style are abundant. And, assessments will be made for better or worse. As the composer himself once sagely suggested, better to let the tide of history judge one's work. Hence, the question -- how can one best understand, and justly appreciate, Menottian opera? Especially Menotti's three works *circa* 1950?

One can begin by examining the composer's view of art. Menotti's early artistic outlook was, understandably, colored by youth and, according to Chandler Cowles (Menotti's producer for The Medium), by a sincere innocence. Cowles recalled that the artist in Menotti affected everyone around him:

Gian Carlo was an enormous influence on me...in those days...He taught me about the integrity of the arts...he seemed more innocent then, but he was always an artist...He had this enormous idealism about his art, about the art of the theatre, and about life in general. <sup>36</sup>

The composer has remarked that "in his middle age an artist is apt to look back at his youthful work with some embarrassment. Later in life, though...embarrassment turns into sentimental affection." <sup>37</sup> But Menotti admitted that youth in art had little value unless the artist was able to capture the very essence of youth in his work. He said that as long as the youthfulness of his early works could still touch the listener, he was glad the "ever-ready undertakers" had not yet succeeded in burying them. <sup>38</sup>

As with many artists, recapturing the true "artistic face... [hidden beneath] the layers of masks" posed the greatest difficulty for Menotti. He said that, in the end, all one can do is be artistically honest and candid with oneself:

Artists struggling to be original seem to be unaware of this...[that] there are no two people alike in the world...The only unoriginal artists are those who assume the traits of other personalities, whether they feel akin to them or not...<sup>39</sup>

According to the composer, there is only one way to reveal one's true artistic character, and that is to "accept what we are, which at times may prove embarrassing. It takes the courage of genius to face one's public in complete nakedness."<sup>40</sup> It is easy to misunderstand what Menotti means, or to misinterpret the picture of Menotti, the artist, struggling to be himself, particularly in light of the immodest criticism which beset his work. But tradition validates Menottian opera, after all is said and done, and tradition, one hopes, will expose both the bias and the value of his work as well over the long term.

One could frame the argument another way by saying that criticism has been an indispensable part of Menotti's artistic development. In T.S. Eliot's words, "criticism is as inevitable as breathing" to the artist. For example, much has been said about those aspects of Menotti's style in which he resembled someone else. In spite of claims on the part of critics that they found the personal or the peculiar in Menotti, quite often what they stumbled on to was an aspect they respected in some past composer; what Eliot identified as the "ancestral qualities that assert their immortality most rigorously"<sup>41</sup> in operatic composition. The supernatural element in The Medium, for instance, had its precedent in Von Weber's Der Freischütz; the political tyranny of The Consul had appeared before in the *persona* of the Grand Inquisitor (arguably a political as well as a religious figure) in Verdi's Don Carlo; even the icons of religious mysticism in The Saint

of Bleecker Street were clearly there in Wagner's Parsifal. This is not to say that the traditional elements one observed in Menotti's work came easy. If anything, they were inherited through great labor. The task involved scrutinizing the present in order to reintroduce those elements from the past which the composer deemed artistically timeless. Almost always, the best of such elements were comprised of both feeling and logic. Both factors, it appears, have been universally present in the worthiest specimens of theatrical art. They are there in the works of Shakespeare, Ibsen and in Miller, as well as in Monteverdi, Mozart and Verdi.

So why did Menotti choose to rely on the worthiest examples of the past for his work? Precisely because they existed in the present, however altered or disguised. And so, in terms of the *new* in Menotti's work, the relations, proportions, and values underwent a readjustment. Such was the conformity of the old, in Puccini, let us say, to the new, in Menotti. The real test of the value of the Menottian style was determined by how it fit in, by how it successfully conformed or adapted itself to the current musical scene. Hence, the question, was any critic in a position to call himself an infallible judge of Menotti's highly individual style, or of Menotti's conformity to a style of the past? Not likely. Individuality and conformity, it could be argued, were never independent critical entities. It is unlikely one would find that Menotti's work was one thing, individual, and not the other, conforming.

Menotti said on more than one occasion that time does not improve art, nor does time develop it. Nevertheless, it is true that art is never quite the same with the passage of time. In terms of *verismo*, artistic change abandoned nothing in its path. New developments grew out of the left-overs of the past. In the greater artistic sense, one never really outgrew the best in tradition, the vestiges of the old continued to be

appreciated anew, whether in Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, or Auden; or in Donizetti, Verdi, Puccini or Menotti.

One noteworthy difference between Puccini and Menotti was that the latter composer had the distinct advantage of hindsight, of being aware of both the good and the bad in the *veristic* style in a way that Puccini never could, given his closeness to it. To say that opera has come a long way since Puccini is to acknowledge that we know so much more now about the art form. But it is also to say that advances in the very material and method of opera, particularly at the hands of Menotti, have built precisely upon such historical bases as those of Puccini. The worth of an operatic composer like Menotti becomes evident when one recognizes the sacrifice he made in surrendering himself to that which was more valuable, more enduring in the traditional sense. In other words, Menotti's progress, more than anyone else's in modern American opera, was contingent upon a negation of artistic personality, upon what he gave up for the benefit of the greater good of tradition. <sup>42</sup> By the same token, the modern period deserved another good turn, but failed to get it, in the form of an objective appraisal of his work. In the same way that tradition gained from Menotti's musico-theatrical contributions, so should it have gained as well from a just review of his work, from criticisms, that is, which could have served better purposes by being directed not so much at the artist, as they often were, but upon the act, i.e. upon his work.

For the present writer to call Menotti a great artist, apart from being a highly arguable point, is needless. It was not Menotti's greatness, or even the intensity of his musical passion, that counted, but the intensity of the artistic process beneath his acts, which was never in doubt, an intense process that served the ends of tradition. So it is that in his personal emotions, which found a voice in his music, Menotti was hardly remarkable. Admittedly, the emotional profile of the composer may have been

melodramatic, poetic, or sentimental, but such a makeup was hardly different from one typically encountered in life. The composer acted as an artistic medium, if you will. Impressions and experiences found expression in Menotti when combined in unusual and unexpected ways. He believed, as Verdi and Puccini did before him, that a basic error in art was to seek new human emotions to express. Such searches for novelty ultimately led to a discovery of the perverse. And, Menotti had once learned, this was a digression that his moral outlook would never permit. The composer's emotions were ordinary, to be sure, but they expressed a *collective* feeling. T.S. Eliot argued that such emotions in an artist were not actually emotions at all, but a "concentration of feeling, of a very great number of experiences that do not seem to be experiences at all."<sup>43</sup> In short, these were emotions that had as their province the collective unconscious. The unleashing of musical emotion in Menotti's music, then, was to be interpreted not so much as an expression of his musical personality, as an escape from it, an escape made in the collective spirit of all pre-existing emotion, one that was made in the name of the worthiest elements of the traditional in opera.

### **Conclusions and Final Statement**

In addition to being a man of theatre who understood the stage very well, Menotti was an idealist. His error, if one must look for one, is that he "ran too fast," that he sought the quickest realization of this ideal. His failure, if one must find one, is the circumvention of this ideal, one that demanded the beneficent effects of time for its complete development. In his haste, Menotti purportedly not only neglected certain details of his style, it is also said he overlooked a few larger issues of an artistic craft that greatly depended on meticulous attention for its total acceptance by the critical community. Nevertheless, one cannot question or deny Menotti's unbridled urge for discovery, an urge borne out of youth from which emanated three unique, lyrical

masterworks depictive of the composer's earliest artistic *persona*. And whether an aesthetic truth exists in any of them, it is unlikely that any serious artist could have avoided, at least in his youth, the hope of being the discoverer of such a truth. <sup>44</sup>

The point has been made that there was never a question about Menotti's success with audiences; that he succeeded equally well with critics is another matter. Suffice it to say that he survived his detractors. In this way, he weathered artistic rejection, the strong envy of fellow composers, as well as the calumnies of critics. Throughout, the Menottian "Credo" remained unaltered, unassailable: music continued to be the means, never the end, in the projection of effective theatre. To this end, Menotti relied on the quality of his presentations and his continual hand in all aspects of a production as a way of making his art accessible to an increasingly diversified public.

Menotti's success is nothing short of amazing, not because he succeeded, but because he did so in the face of circumstances and conditions that would have overwhelmed and discouraged a lesser composer (or should one say, a greater composer?). Such success should be viewed in its true context: in the face of fiscal calamity at the Metropolitan Opera during the post-war period; in the context of rival works on Broadway like those of Blitzstein, Weill, and Rodgers; in view of the fact that the American economy in 1946 was still in a state of recovery, not just from the effects of the Depression, but also from those of war; that he succeeded with opera in an arena that was largely foreign to opera, i.e. on Broadway; that he succeeded singlehandedly, for the most part, i.e. acting as his own composer, librettist, and director; that he succeeded with three distinct works, not just one (not counting Amelia at the Ball at the Metropolitan Opera, The Old Maid and the Thief and Amahl and the Night Visitors); that he succeeded not only in one media, but in three, on stage, on radio, and on television (not counting film); and finally, that Menotti succeeded as an Italian citizen in America

during a politically volatile time in international affairs following World War II. Undoubtedly, such success was supported to an inestimable degree by his polemical style, one that saw much press in New York and in Europe during his formative years. His high rhetorical profile surely made a difference in his career, for it helped to keep him in the public eye.

Some would hold that Menotti was better at business than he was at composing. His peers maintain he was in the right place at the right time. True or not, he brought a renewed relevance to the operatic form. This message of renewal brought him into kinship with his theatrical contemporaries in ideology and in practice. His efforts had the felicitous result of educating audiences on opera, or rather, more to the point, about the *meaning* of opera. Indirectly, too, he restimulated the interest in grand opera, both in major houses and at the local level.

Menotti's *neo-verismo* was an eclectic, though highly unique, style. As with the *veristi*, Menotti's disillusionment over what he perceived as the near-realization of a dream must have come as a heavy blow, particularly in the composer's later years, when he was given to severe self-appraisal and introspection. His compulsive search for artistic perfection eluded him. It seemed that elusiveness formed the essence of such perfection.<sup>45</sup> Surely, the frustration borne out of this search colored his later moral-artistic outlook. It is the hope that time will heal the scars of impropriety and erase the memory of critical indiscretions that brought bitterness to the composer. At best, Menotti himself admitted, "an artist can only find serenity by resigning himself to the curse of imperfection."<sup>46</sup> And yet, in the words of Oscar Wilde, only through art would it ever be possible to *realize* one's perfection.<sup>47</sup> Need one remind Menotti of this? Probably not. ∞

## Notes to Chapter Seven:

- 1 Oscar G. Brockett, The History of European and American Theatre and Drama Since 1870 (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 493.
- 2 Ethan Mordden, A Fireside Companion to the Theatre (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), p. 88.
- 3 Manfred Boetzkes, "Staging" in History of Opera, ed. Stanley Sadie (New York: Macmillan, 1989), p. 350.
- 4 Robert Ackart, "Style all the while, but what constitutes style?" in Musical America 75, 15 February 1955, p. 23.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- 7 Kenneth Schuller, "Verismo Opera and the Verists" (Ph.D dissertation, Washington University, 1960), p. 179.
- 8 Gruen, Menotti, p. 69.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 78.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 125.
- 11 Gian Carlo Menotti, "Notes on Opera as Basic Theatre" in Perspectives USA, 1955, p. 6.
- 12 "Opera in the Twentieth-Century: Naturalism" in The New Grove Dictionary of Music, vol. 13, p. 605.
- 13 "Musical theatre" in The New Grove Dictionary of American Music, vol. 3 (New York: Macmillan, 1980), p. 306-7.
- 14 Donald Jay Grout, A Short History of Opera (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), p. 437.
- 15 William Weaver, The Golden Century of Italian Opera (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1980), p. 204.
- 16 Edward Rothstein, "Sic Transit Goya" in The New Republic 196:4, 26 January 1987, p. 28.
- 17 Robert Ackart, "Style All the While, But What Constitutes Style?" in Musical America 75, 15 February 1955, p. 191.
- 18 Oscar Brockett, History of Drama Since 1870, p. 493.
- 19 Eric Bentley, The Life of the Drama (New York: Atheneum Press, 1965), p. 198.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 200.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 201.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 205.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 207.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 210.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 212.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 213.
- 28 Joseph Kerman, Opera as Drama, ed. revised (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 15-16.
- 29 John Ardoin, "A Welcome Gift" in Opera News, June 1981, p. 9.
- 30 Olin Downes, in text of J.M. Brown, "Seeing Things," Saturday Review 30, 31 May 1947, p. 22.
- 31 John Ardoin, The Stages of Menotti (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1985), p. 41.
- 32 Eric Bentley, Life of the Drama, p. 196.
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 Menotti, "Opera as Basic Theatre," p. 6.
- 35 To this end, this writer borrows from T.S. Eliot's essay for the formal structure of the argumentation and hereby makes full acknowledgement to that work for this purpose.

- <sup>36</sup> Gruen, Menotti, p. 67.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.
- <sup>41</sup> T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," ed. Mortimer J. Adler and Robert M. Hutchins, Gateway to the Great Books (Chicago: William Benton, Publisher, 1963), p. 404.
- <sup>42</sup> This holds true not just for Menotti, but for other more current American operatic composers, like John Adams, for instance.
- <sup>43</sup> T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," p. 410.
- <sup>44</sup> Gruen, Menotti, p. 193.
- <sup>45</sup> John Ardoin, "A Welcome Gift," p. 16.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>47</sup> Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," Intentions, (n.p., 1891).

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## Vita

Born in Texas, Victor Chacon completed his Bachelor's degree in Music at the University of Texas at El Paso and his Master's in Music at the University of Texas at Austin. As a baritone, his mentors in opera have included Dr. Walter Ducloux, Martial Singher, Professors Frank Guarrera, and Vincent Liotta. In art song he has coached with Lawrence Smith, Gwendolyn Koldovsky, and Martial Singher. In 1976, Chacon created the Santa Barbara Opera Theatre, in which he directed and conducted complete productions of Poulenc's The Dialogues of the Carmelites, La Traviata, The Mikado, as well as Menotti's The Medium and The Telephone. Mr. Chacon has taught voice and opera at Santa Barbara City College, Boise State University, Brandon University, and most recently, at San Jose City College. As an apprentice artist with the Santa Fe Opera, Mr. Chacon met and coached with Gian Carlo Menotti in 1969, the year that saw the American premiere of Menotti's Help! Help! The Globolinks! with the company.