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## ★ RECENTLY IN PERFORMANCES

### **A Baroque Odyssey: 40 Years of Les Arts Florissants**

In 1979, the Franco-American harpsichordist and conductor, William Christie, founded an early music ensemble, naming it *Les Arts Florissants*, after a short opera by Marc-Antoine Charpentier.

### **Miracle on Ninth Avenue**

Gian Carlo Menotti's holiday classic, *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, was the first recorded opera I ever heard. Each Christmas Eve, while decorating the tree, our family sang along with the (still unmatched) original cast version. We knew the recording by heart, right down to the nicks in the LP. Ever since, no matter what the setting or the quality of a performance, I cannot get through it without tearing up.

### **Detlev Glanert: Requiem for Hieronymus Bosch (UK premiere)**

It is perhaps not surprising that the Hamburg-born composer Detlev Glanert should count Hans Werner Henze as one of the formative influences on his work - he did, after all, study with him between 1984 to 1988.

### **Death in Venice at Deutsche Oper Berlin**

This death in Venice is not the end, but the beginning.

### **Saint Cecilia: The Sixteen at Kings Place**

There were eighteen rather than sixteen singers. And, though the concert was entitled Saint Cecilia the repertoire paid homage more emphatically to Mary, Mother of Jesus, and to the spirit of Christmas.

### **Insights on Mahler Lieder, Wigmore Hall, André Schuen**

At the Wigmore Hall, André Schuen and Daniel Heide in a recital of Schubert and Mahler's *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* and *Rückert-Lieder*. Schuen has most definitely arrived, at least among the long-term cognoscenti at the Wigmore Hall who appreciate the intelligence and sensitivity that marks true Lieder interpretation.

### **Ermelinda by San Francisco's Ars Minerva**

It's an opera by Vicentino composer Domenico Freschi that premiered in 1681 at the country home of the son of the doge of Venice. Villa Contarini is a couple of hours on horseback from Vicenza, and a few hours by gondola from Venice).

### **Wozzeck in Munich**

It would be an extraordinary, even an unimaginable *Wozzeck* that failed to move, to chill one to the bone. This was certainly no such *Wozzeck*; Marie's reading from the Bible, *Wozzeck's* demise, the final scene with their son and the other children: all brought that particular *Wozzeck* combination of tears and horror.

### **Korngold's Die tote Stadt in Munich**

I approached this evening as something of a sceptic regarding work and director. My sole prior encounter with Simon Stone's work had not been, to put it mildly, a happy one. Nor do I count myself a subscriber or even affiliate to the Korngold fan club, considerable in number and still more considerable in fervency.

**Exceptional song recital from Hurn Court Opera at Salisbury Arts Centre**



09 Dec 2019

## Miracle on Ninth Avenue

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So take it with a grain of salt when I praise *Amahl* as the only truly perfect opera. Here the cliché is literally true: one cannot imagine adding or subtracting a single note. Other canonical operas approach such distilled perfection: Mozart's *Così fan tutte*, Rossini's *Barbiere di Siviglia*, Verdi's *Il trovatore* and *Falstaff*, Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi*, and Strauss's *Salome* come to mind. Yet even these great works contain a few moments, if not an aria or two, where inspiration flags. Not so *Amahl*.


From the start, critics have protested that *Amahl* is flawless only because it is so simple-minded. On the train to the performance, I ran into one of the most experienced and enthusiastic opera-goers I know – someone who has been around long enough to have watched the premiere of the opera's live premiere on NBC TV almost seventy years ago. He scoffed at my choice of evening entertainment, insisting that he never wants to hear *Amahl* again.

Miracle on Ninth Avenue

A review by Andrew Moravcsik

All photos by B.A. Van Sise

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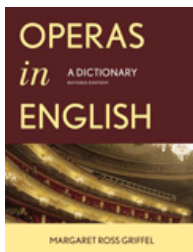
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Thanks to the enterprise and vision of Lynton Atkinson - Artistic Director of Dorset-based Hurn Court Opera - two promising young singers on the threshold of glittering careers gave an outstanding recital at Salisbury's prestigious Art Centre.

**Lohengrin in Munich**

An exceptional *Lohengrin*, this. I had better explain. Yes, it was exceptional in the quality of much of the singing, especially the two principal female roles, yet also in luxury casting such as Martin Gantner as the King's Herald.

**Hansel and Gretel in San Francisco**

This Grimm's fairytale in its operatic version found its way onto the War Memorial stage in the guise of a new "family friendly" production first seen last holiday season at London's Royal Opera House.

**An hypnotic Death in Venice at the Royal Opera House**

Spot-lit in the prevailing darkness, Gustav von Aschenbach frowns restively as he picks up an hour-glass from a desk strewn with literary paraphernalia, objects d'art, time-pieces and a pair of tall candles in silver holders - by the light of which, so Thomas Mann tells us in his novella *Death in Venice*, the elderly writer 'would offer up to art, for two or three ardently conscientious morning hours, the strength he had garnered during sleep'.

**Philip Glass's Orphée at English National Opera**

Jean Cocteau's 1950 *Orphée* - and Philip Glass's chamber opera based on the film - are so closely intertwined it should not be a surprise that this new production for English National Opera often seems unable to distinguish the two. There is never a shred of ambiguity that cinema and theatre are like mirrors, a recurring feature of this production; and nor is there much doubt that this is as *opera noir* it gets.

**Rapt audience at Dutch National Opera's riveting Walküre**

"Don't miss this final chance - ever! - to see *Die Walküre*", urges the Dutch National Opera website.

**Sarah Wegener sings Strauss and Jurowski's shattering Mahler**

A little under a month ago, I reflected on Vladimir Jurowski's tempi in Mahler's 'Resurrection'. That willingness to range between extremes, often within the same work, was a very striking feature of this second concert, which also fielded a Mahler symphony - this time the Fifth. But we also had a Wagner prelude and Strauss songs to leave some of us scratching our heads.

**Manon Lescaut in San Francisco**

Of the San Francisco Opera *Manon Lescaut*s (in past seasons Leontyne Price, Mirella Freni, Karita Mattila among others, all in their full maturity) the latest is Armenian born Parisian finished soprano Lianna Haroutounian in her role debut. And Mme. Haroutounian is surely the finest of them all.

**A lukewarm performance of Berlioz's Roméo et Juliette from the LSO and Tilson Thomas**

A double celebration was the occasion for a packed house at the Barbican: the 150th anniversary of Berlioz's birth, alongside Michael Tilson Thomas's fifty-year association with the London Symphony Orchestra.

**Mahler's Third Symphony launches Prague Symphony Orchestra's UK tour**



One can understand why. It is a children's opera based on an unabashedly sentimental Christmas tale concocted by Menotti himself: on their way to Bethlehem, the Three Kings pass by the house of a poor crippled boy, who is miraculously cured and joins their caravan. It was the first made-for-TV opera, which meant the story had to be told in just 45 minutes, so as to leave space for an announcer's introduction and, in the first years it was broadcast, a commercial for Hallmark Cards. In the heyday of atonality, Menotti's music was a throwback to the Italian romantic idiom of Puccini, yet with much less complexity. After a brief prelude, the action starts and ends with an oboe ditty in C Major; in between, it deploys diatonic major and minor harmonies (though at times more complex and harmonically ambiguous than they may seem) and conventional folk rhythms, all played by a modest chamber orchestra.

Yet, like all the greatest operas, the music composed for *Amahl* is onomatopoeic. Elsewhere, Menotti employed dense textures, complex tonalities, and weird orchestral timbres; here, his writing is deliberately naïve and sincere. It underscores the libretto's central message: life is ultimately about love and generosity, on the model of the family – and in this, the disadvantaged among us deserve special regard. Moreover, as Menotti reminds us in his production notes, the story is told from the perspective of Amahl, an innocent (if mischievous) child. It is he who first sees the kings, defends his mother (when she steals out of love for him), receives the miracle, and departs at the end to thank the baby Jesus himself. Only by watching this do the adults around him learn that Christmas is not, as King Melchior puts it, about the rich giving gold, frankincense, myrrh and other worldly things to someone who "does not need it." It is about helping those immediately before us. The same conviction inspired Charles Dickens, O. Henry, Hans Christian Anderson, Frank Capra, Dr. Seuss and many other authors of classic holiday tales.



The Anvil in Basingstoke was the first location for a strenuous seven-concert UK tour by the Prague Symphony Orchestra - a venue-hopping trip, criss-crossing the country from Hampshire to Wales, with four northern cities and a pit-stop in London spliced between Edinburgh and Nottingham.

**Rigoletto past, present and future: a muddled production by Christiane Lutz for Glyndebourne Touring Opera**

Charlie Chaplin was a master of slapstick whose rag-to-riches story - from workhouse-resident clog dancer to Hollywood legend with a salary to match his status - was as compelling as the physical comedy that he learned as a member of Fred Karno's renowned troupe.

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In sixty years, no production of this opera I have attended captures the essence of *Amahl* better than this revival by **On Site Opera**. This company has become an essential element in the exciting renaissance of small-scale lyric theater in New York today. Its specialty is "site-specific" opera: immersive performances to small audiences in non-traditional everyday spaces.

Last year this production premiered to great praise. This year it returned to the sanctuary of the 175-year old Church of the Holy Apostles on Ninth Avenue at 28th Street – a lovely space which doubles as the site of the largest feeding program of the Episcopal Church, serving over 1000 meals every weekday lunch. The performance takes place in the middle of the church sanctuary, with the audience all around.

Menotti set the opera in a shepherd's hut two millennia ago, which he imagined to be much like the rural Italy of his youth. This production transports the action to the present and to an urban setting – just like that immediately outside the church. Amahl becomes a poor kid who plays with plastic superhero toys, his mother a tired single parent. The three kings are eccentrically dressed street people schlepping their possessions around in shopping carts. It remains deliberately unclear whether they perceive the same reality others do – and whether their quest to honor the newborn Jesus is real or delusional. Most in the cast are people of color, and the chorus and dancers are comprised of performers who have experienced homelessness at one time or another.



For a modern urban audience, this approach renders the relevance of the opera's central point obvious and amplifies the opera's dramatic intensity. One example must suffice. A high point of the opera occurs when Amahl's

Mother, thinking of stealing some of the kings' gold to help her child, sings:

*All that Gold! All that Gold!  
I wonder if rich people know  
what to do with their gold?  
Do they know how a child could be fed?  
Do rich people know?*

No one can miss the point when she addresses these yearning vocal lines to a largely white, well-educated and wealthy Manhattan audience sitting just a few feet away.

One of the strong points of On Site Opera is its ability to find singers with the technical facility and dramatic immediacy to deliver such lines in such intimate setting. Here they succeeded brilliantly. All were believable in an immersive setting. As Amahl's Mother, the young Virginian soprano Aundi Marie Moore sang with warmth and soared passionately above the ensemble when needed. Boy soprano Devin Zamir Coleman, a multi-talented sixth grader from Harlem with diverse film, vocal and instrumental credits, sang with remarkable intonation and power. Joshua Jerimiah, Musa Ngqungwana and Julius Ahn – who have collectively sung on the stages of many of America's major opera houses – comprised a sonorous trio of kings. Jonathan R. Green appeared as their servant (here a security guard), singing with an appropriately harsh edge.

One could raise technical quibbles. Moore struggled with some low-lying phrases. A sweeter timbre and more attention to rhythmic cadence of *parlando* phrases, which Menotti notated precisely and early performances under his direction observe strictly, might have allowed Coleman to better convey Amahl's combination of insouciance and innocence. The orchestral playing and choral singing was more boisterous than tender. Whether due to first night jitters or challenging acoustics unsuited to a studio opera, moreover, the performers were not always together and some balances confusing. (The kings, for example, got softer as they neared Amahl's house.) The chorus struggled to render some passages cleanly (not least the final fugal section), while the dancers were more exuberant than skilled.

None of this really matters. For those who attended, the sincerity and power of Menotti's music and message, conveyed in a uniquely modern setting, transcended any technical limitations. I tried hard and failed to resist tears, as did dozens of other similarly entranced spectators around me. This unique production deserves to be revived as a permanent part of New York's holiday season.

***Andrew Moravcsik***

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