

Program Notes – Amahl and the Night Visitors

Premiere: December 24, 1951, NBC Television

James Sewell Ballet Premiere: November 16, 1995,

Faribault Junior High School, Faribault, Minnesota

Words and music by Gian Carlo Menotti

Choreography by James Sewell

Lighting by Kevin A. Jones

Set Design by Peter Hauser

Set Construction by John Brandvold, Susan Brockman, Steve Rohde, Andrew Saboe

Costume and Properties Design and Construction by Mary Hansmeyer

The development of this ballet was made possible by the generosity of Elizabeth Swailes.

Original Cast:

Amahl • Sally Rousse

His Mother • Penelope Freeh

The Three Kings

Kaspar • Anna Laghezza

Melchior • Christian Burns

Balthazar • Joel Klausler

The Page • Catherine Kjome

Shepherd Dancers • Molly Meneely and James Sewell

Shepherd Chorus • Students of River Bend Institute for the Arts and Faribault Public Schools

The Amahl Story

“Amahl and the Night Visitors” tells a simple tale of a crippled boy and his mother. They live in poverty among shepherds. One night, the Three Kings, on their star-led way to Bethlehem to pay homage to the newborn Christ Child, stop for shelter at the rude hut where Amahl and his mother live. They are given hospitality and are entertained by the neighboring shepherds. The Mother envies the gold and other splendid gifts being brought to this child the Kings do not even know. In the early dawn, she steals some of the gold and is caught. When she explains to the Kings that she needs it for her starving child she is forgiven. Then they tell her about their Child and the new light He will bring into the world and the kingdom He will build. The poor widow repents and returns the gold. Amahl, in a gesture of innocent generosity, offers his crutch – his most prized possession – as a gift to the Child. In doing so, he is miraculously cured of his lameness, and he is allowed to accompany the Kings to Bethlehem to give thanks to the Christ Child.

— Linda Mack

Librettist and composer Gian Carlo Menotti

At the age of seven, under the guidance of his mother, Gian Carlo Menotti (b. 1911, Cadeigliano, Italy; d. 2007, Monte Carlo) began to compose songs and, four years later,

wrote the words and music of his first opera, *"The Death of Pierrot."* In 1923, he began his formal training at the Verdi Conservatory in Milan. Following the death of his father, his mother took him to the United States, where he was enrolled at Philadelphia's Curtis Institute of Music. There he completed his musical studies, working in composition under Rosario Scalerò. By far, Menotti's best-known work is the Christmas classic *"Amahl and the Night Visitors,"* composed for NBC-TV in 1951. In 1984, Menotti was awarded the Kennedy Center Honor for lifetime achievement in the arts. He was chosen the 1991 "Musician of the Year" by Musical America.

— G. Schirmer

American Sign Language

American Sign Language (ASL) is a visual-spatial language used by the deaf community in the United States and English-speaking parts of Canada. It is the native language of many deaf men and women, as well as some hearing children born into deaf families. ASL shares no grammatical similarities with English, and has its own rules for the creation of words, phonetics, and grammar. ASL has a topic-comment syntax, while English uses subject-verb-object. Hand gestures are only one component of ASL. Facial features are also significant. In addition, ASL makes use of the space surrounding the signer to describe places and persons that are not present.

— Karen Nakamura,

James Sewell Ballet's Production

In 1995, several Minnesota organizations teamed-up to create a ballet version of *"Amahl and the Night Visitors"* that would incorporate American Sign Language as part of the choreography.

The partners included James Sewell Ballet; the Riverbend Institute for the Arts, located on the campus of the Minnesota State Academy for the Deaf in Faribault; Wildwood Artist Series, Mahtomedi; Independent School Districts 656 and 832 in Faribault and Mahtomedi, respectively; and the Mahtomedi Area Educational Foundation.

We presented our production for the first time, November 16, 1995, in Faribault. In quick succession that year, it also was presented for the Learning Center for Homeless Families, Minneapolis; Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti; and Wildwood Artist Series, Mahtomedi.

In choreographing the *"Amahl"* story, James Sewell incorporated the visual-spatial movement of American Sign Language (ASL) with classical ballet. His interest in ASL was prompted, in part, by his realization that Western dance culture, particularly ballet, has not developed a movement vocabulary for the performers' hands.

Peter Hauser's set design was inspired by the imagery of stained glass, a concept carried over to the saturated blocks of color in the performers' costumes, designed by Mary Hansmeyer to look like moving stained glass. From the beginning, the set and costume imagery has been enhanced by Kevin A. Jones' lighting.

— Gary Peterson, 2003