

I'm not at all sure that the tradeoff between the wisdom that comes with age and the concurrent loss of one's treasured illusions that is the inevitable counterbalance to growing wise is an even one. The wisdom one ages into is nowhere near as profound as one had hoped for. The loss of illusions is more devastating than one had feared. I do know that the process is relentless and that it pretty much stinks. I suppose I should be a man, suck it up, and never complain. But to complain is to be American. And I am, no matter how much at one time I had hoped to be Italian, as American as Royal Pudding

The occasion of Christmas seems to rub my nose ever longer in the loss of illusion and memories each year. Each year the intense sensations of the great [Saturnalian](#) festival of childhood, first my own pleasures and then those of watching my children, now grown, seem farther and farther away, farther removed even than my only grandchild whom the United States Coast Guard, in an act of spiteful vengeance, has removed to darkest Puerto Rico. Every year at this time even at my great age I wait with some eagerness the first real snowfall, which fifty years ago signaled for me the approach of the Christmas holidays. But even when the snow actually falls, the thrill seems to be farther and fainter, diminished not only by global warming, or by the historically and pitifully inadequate winters of the Ohio Valley as seen in comparison to the manly winters of the upper Midwest where my memories were formed, or by the shocking idiocy of television [weathercasters](#) for whom each snowfall is the first and direst. Now with the first snow comes the sense that some damned fool talking on the telephone in a Ford Excursion will fail to understand that the laws of physics apply even to coddled suburbanite [SUV](#) drivers, will hit an icy patch, and will slide into my own modest vehicle, crushing me to death when I have yet to spend the 80,000 Delta [Skymiles](#) I have hoarded.

I would, I am afraid, if I gave in to melancholia, be numbered among the many millions of Americans who are every year at this time on the front page of the newspaper solemnly pronounced by the mental health profession to be depressed into insensibility, were it not for the one reliable seasonal pleasure that puts a firm brake on the steep annual slide into self pity and pathological irritability. That would be music.

Music of the season. Music from the 16th to the 20th centuries. Renaissance stuff.

[Irving](#) Berlin. Almost all of it. I have even come to like the three songs about [dreidls](#) that I suspect were whipped up by quick thinking music teachers for school choirs sometime in the eighties to spread the cheer around to the neighboring festivities.

I am particularly attached to [Amahl](#) and the Night Visitors, the opera written for

NBC television by the Italian composer Giancarlo Menotti fifty-three years ago. I am old enough to have seen the opera when it was first produced. I watched it with my numerous brothers on my aunt's early tv. The broadcast was in black and white, and the screen was the size of a Palm Pilot. What I remember most about that early viewing is not the music but the high ick factor associated with the boy soprano in the title role. That ick factor is a stopper for a lot of people when they see the opera which has now passed into the realm of public school productions. I quite understand. There are few things in life as disconcerting as a prepubescent boy who is comfortable on stage,

But the opera has grown on me.

Like all operas not based on Shakespeare or events in the life of Richard Nixon, Amahl and the Night Visitors has a libretto that does not stand up particularly well to close examination by the cynical. A penniless crippled shepherd boy and his mum live alone at the edge of starvation, but not so close to the edge that they cannot belt out a lot of powerful singing when they are visited by three kings who conveniently speak their language and also sing splendidly. Menotti does not say where this starvation is occurring, but I know that it is Italy, and that is perhaps why I continue to enjoy Amahl so much. For all that the work was commissioned by General Sarnoff's mighty network for presentation to an America steeped in Dickenso-New England Christmas traditions, and even though its libretto is in English Amahl and the Night Visitors is profoundly and endearingly Italian in its themes and its messages. Themes and messages that I learned years after that first blurry viewing.

For one too brief period, at the extremely impressionable age of seventeen, I came as close to being Italian as I ever will be. I was in residence in that most splendid, most spectacular, most Italian city, Naples. How I came to be there will have to be dealt with in a budget some other day. I will tell you, though, that I thought I had died and gone to heaven. Heaven being a place where chestnuts roast routinely on an open fire, where the December wind is just enough to call for a topcoat, where the fishmongers set out elaborate vats of live eels that will writhe and plash to prove their freshness for the twelve days of Christmas.

Amahl is set in the countryside, however, far from Naples and Rome, but it's Italian countryside. How do I know that Amahl is in Italy? It is not just that the midwinter is neither so bleak nor so cold that a shepherd boy cannot sit outside and play his pipe in the dark. Nor is it that Menotti is a native of that country. What puts the opera squarely on the peninsula is its unmistakably Italian take on a holiday that we think was invented by Charles Dickens and Clement dark Moore.

One giveaway is the very Italian lack of interest in historic reality and the equal interest in making the legends of the Bible fit the patterns of Italian life. The tendency to fit **Judeo** Christianity into the local landscape is longstanding and deep seated, however unsettling it may be for the seriously educated believer. To stand in one of the shadowy Roman basilicas built onto or into the site of much older pagan temples is to understand the religiosity of this nominally Roman Catholic nation. The country that burned Savonarola at the stake after being exposed to his Calvin-like seriousness is the country that had centuries earlier turned its old reliable local gods and goddesses into saints and continued and continues to do business with them. Sometimes they didn't even bother to change the names. The most beautiful farm I have ever seen was a collection of **moldering** pink stucco buildings in Calabria named of all things Saint Venus. The historians of art amongst you know that the religious paintings of the Italian renaissance routinely present the stories of the **bible** as if they were taking place in suburban **Tuscany** or **Lombardy** or **Umbria**. And why not?

Amahl and the Night Visitors is a **presepio** come to life. What, you may ask, is a **presepio**. The **presepio** is the Italian version of the crèche. It is the transportation of the nativity scene to Italy. Although The Christmas tree has filtered into Italian life, in the best households it plays second fiddle to the **presepio**, which, like those renaissance paintings, takes the nativity scene from its historically correct eastern Mediterranean setting to the Italian peninsula, where, it is understood, Jesus would have been so much happier to have been born. For does not the food in the bible sound sadly unappetizing? In Naples, where the art of the **presepio** is at its finest, Bethlehem becomes a Neapolitan street scene, peopled with local craftsman and families doing their shopping. It is a celebration of Italian life which holds most dear food and the family. There is a whole street in the modern city devoted to **presepio** supplies, little stores stocked with every possible variety of miniature fruits and meats and tiny human figures from every walk of life to enjoy them. When, in *Amahl*, the mother sends her son to round up the shepherd neighbors and tells them to bring whatever they have in the house, the peasants arrive with enough produce to stock a Dean and **DeLuca** store. And then everybody dances a nice tarantella. It is a **presepio** come to life. That the gospel writers failed to include such scenes is one of the major oversights in the Bible, another reason for Italians not to take the Bible too seriously.

There is also, in the opera, the hint of another Italian tradition, the appearance of *La Befana*, the witch of the epiphany. **Menotti's** kings, who have put up for the night with *Amahl* and his mother, have with them their presents for the child they seek. When the

shepherds have gone back to their own homes and the kingly entourage has at last gotten some **shuteye**, the destitute mother talks herself into filching a few of the gold coins. When she is caught red handed by the king's vigilant page, the visitors graciously decide to let her keep them, explaining that the child for whom they are intended will not need them. The repentant mother apologizes, regretting that she has nothing to send the miraculous baby herself, leading her son to offer his crutch which, in a Christmas miracle, he no longer needs. The kings offer to take Amahl with them to present the crutch in person, leaving the mother alone. Poignant as the scene is to Americans, it resonates deeper for the Italians who know that the Befana was the woman who failed to welcome the kings and who now travels through eternity looking for the holy child, distributing presents to good children on the twelfth day of Christmas. Amahl's mother came just that close to becoming the Befana, saved at the last minute by the kings' generosity and by a minor miracle.

I don't know if Menotti's little hour long opera is art. I hope it is not, since art in America has become even more sanctified and **humbuggish** than religion, if such a thing is possible, and to become art is to become holy and, therefore dead. I do know that there are some great vocal ensembles, some pretty dance music, and melodies that evoke the tunes of a bagpiper I once saw who had wandered into the town square from the hills outside **Castrovillari**, reason enough for the opera to have stayed with me from vinyl **lp** to **cd** to my **ipod** where it is now in residence so that I may fall asleep hearing **Menotti's** excellent Christmas music without driving my wife into the guest bedroom and where it drives away nightmares of **SUVs** on ice.

Buone feste atutti..