CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

Gian Carlo Menotti: Musician and Dramatist

A graduate project submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for a Master of Music in Music, Performance

By
Stephen Schultheis

May 2016
The graduate project of Stephen Schultheis is approved:

Professor Edward Francis

Date

Dr. Alexandra Monchick

Date

Dr. Dmitry Rachmanov, Chair

Date

California State University, Northridge
# Table of Contents

Copyright ii  
Signatures iii  
Abstract v  
Thesis 1  
Early Life and Training 5  
The Old Maid and the Thief 8  
Ricercare and Toccata on a Theme from *The Old Maid and the Thief* 13  
The Minstrel Show 15  
The Island God 22  
The Consul 25  
Later Works 32  
Conclusion 36  
Bibliography 40
Gian Carlo Menotti: Musician and Dramatist

By Stephen Schultheis

Master of Music in Music, Performance

Gian Carlo Menotti has long been acknowledged as among the foremost Italian-American opera composers of the 20th century. Born in 1911, he was an avid student of the piano during his youth, which he spent in Italy. At a very young age, he wrote the opera *The Little Mermaid*—this early opera demonstrates the composer’s interest in fantasy and the supernatural. He studied at the Milan Conservatory from 1924 to 1927, but neither he nor his mother found the musical education that was available in Italy or Milan satisfactory to the young man’s talents. After this brief period of study at the Milan Conservatory, Menotti therefore came to America and attended the Curtis Institute, from which he graduated in 1933 and where he wrote his first
great opera *Amelia al Ballo*. Menotti wrote the librettos for nearly all his operas. Every opera that he composed after *Amelia al Ballo* had an English text, though they were often performed in other languages around the world. It seems fairly clear that, after studying in the United States, Menotti became interested in composing music in an American style. At Curtis, while practicing the music of the great Italian masters, he heard the sound of jazz and other American popular idioms in the hallway. These American vernacular styles seem to have influenced Menotti’s compositional style profoundly.

In fact, Menotti’s decision to compose music in an American style had a political dimension as well: he did so in order to express his disapproval of the fascist part of Mussolini that was rising to power in his native country of Italy during the 1930s. Realizing that America was his salvation from the fascism of Mussolini, Menotti endeavored to honor the history of American music throughout his career. Throughout his career, Menotti had a complicated relationship with his native country. He was aware of its history from the period of the Romans the medieval period, when it was a series of warring city-states, to modern times. In fact, he composed one of his greatest operas, *The Island God*, which dealt with classical mythology as a subject, in 1942, when Mussolini was invading Ethiopia, an African nation. Whereas Menotti’s ancestry lay in Italy, the true ancestry of the United States lay in Africa.

It is my intention to demonstrate that Menotti was actually influenced profoundly by the music of 19th century African-Americans. Menotti’s music owes much to the American musical theater, which is itself ultimately rooted in African-American minstrel shows of the 19th century. In other words, when Menotti came to America, his music began to reflect the influence of
African-American music. In fact, there are clear parallels between the music of Menotti and that of the American composer Scott Joplin. Menotti’s most advanced piano composition, *Ricercare and Toccata on a Theme from the Old Maid and the Thief*, has a strong sense of syncopation in the manner of ragtime. The piece also uses contrasting rhythmic patterns between the hands—a signature aspect of the music of Scott Joplin. Also in the tradition of Joplin, Menotti was a great proponent of musical education.

Perhaps most significantly, Menotti’s operas, particularly the *Old Maid and the Thief*, seem to be indebted to the African-American minstrel show in that they have a profound sense of the grotesque. *The Old Maid and the Thief* is, after all, entitled “A Grotesque Opera in 14 Scenes.” The prominent use of the supernatural in Menotti’s operas is further evidence of the influence of the black 19th century minstrel show. This element also makes Menotti’s aesthetic similar to that of Scott Joplin in the opera *Treemonisha*. In this thesis, my intention is to explore how Menotti’s music was influenced by the African-American minstrel shows of the 19th century. Black people performed in minstrel shows extensively in the 19th century: this was an avenue of work open to black people. In these shows, black people portray themselves as ignorant, dim-witted and clumsy. Minstrel shows have a strong sense of self-parody and humiliation. The shows often had a shocking effect on the audience. It is my ultimate goal to show that Menotti’s operas were profoundly influenced by African-American minstrel shows of the 19th century, and that the influence of black American music transformed Menotti from an Italian composer into an American composer.
Thesis

Gian-Carlo Menotti has long been acknowledged as among the pre-eminent Italian-American opera composers of the twentieth century. Scholars and pianists have typically placed Menotti in the tradition of Italian opera composers, such as Donizetti, Verdi and Puccini. My belief is that Menotti’s music does indeed reflect the traditions and forms of the great Italian opera composers who lived prior to the 20th century, but that Menotti ultimately is more of an American than an Italian composer. The music that he composed throughout his life owes more to the musical traditions of America than to those of Italy or Europe.

Menotti came to the United States in the late 1920s fleeing an atmosphere of tyranny and oppression in Italy and, beginning at approximately the age of eighteen, attended the Curtis Institute. The United States between the two World Wars had a very different musical atmosphere than Menotti’s home city, Milan. It is unlikely that Menotti could have possibly heard American vernacular musical styles in Milan. Given the political environment of Italy in the 1920s and 1930s, American vernacular musical styles would not have been allowed in Italian musical schools. In an interview with Gene Brooks conducted in 1996, Menotti says that he left Milan because of the poor quality of its music schools.¹ In the 1930s, at any American music school, a student would have studied the great European masters, but also would have encountered the sound of jazz and African-American music in the hallways and other classrooms. When he arrived at Curtis in Philadelphia, Menotti encountered entirely different

musical sounds than those to which he had grown accustomed as a child in Italy: perhaps for the first time in his life, he heard jazz and other popular idioms. American vernacular musical styles influenced Menotti profoundly. Menotti was in fact also enamored of the American language: he always wrote the librettos to his operas, nearly all of which are in English. After the production of his first opera in 1933, *Amelia Goes to the Ball*, Menotti composed only English-language operas for the rest of his career. When Menotti began attending the Curtis Institute at the age of 18, he fell in love with the American language just as he fell in love with its music.

What has also not been acknowledged is the extent to which Menotti’s operas were influenced by African-American musical and theatrical traditions. After becoming established as a composer in the United States after his graduation from the Curtis Institute in 1933, Menotti seems to have wanted to compose only English or American operas. In fact, he was interested in disrupting European operatic traditions by fusing them with those of the 19th century African-American musical theater. Menotti seems to have become an American composer in that he began to imbue his operas with a profound sense of the grotesque. *The Old Maid and the Thief*, perhaps Menotti’s most complex if not most famous opera, is entitled a “Grotesque Opera in 14 Scenes.” The sheer titles of some of Menotti’s earliest works, such as *The Little Mermaid*, *The Unicorn* and *The Gorgon*, demonstrate his fascination with the grotesque as a means of artistic expression. The sense of the grotesque that is present in so many of Menotti’s operas seems to have had its roots in the African-American minstrel show of the 19th century. The element of the supernatural that is present in so many of Menotti’s operas, such as *The Little Mermaid* and others, also seems to have arisen from the black minstrel show. In fact, this element makes
Menotti’s aesthetic similar to that of the black composer Scott Joplin in the opera *Treemonisha*, which is heavily indebted to the minstrel show. Unlike Joplin, however, who had little or no formal musical training, Menotti studied extensively at the Curtis Institute in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

In this paper, I will explore the influence of American musical and theatrical traditions on Menotti, in part by examining the connection between Joplin’s music and that of Menotti. Black actors are portrayed as clumsy, dim-witted and ignorant in the minstrel show. The sense of black humor and self-parody inherent in these productions may be seen in Menotti’s operas. Scenes involving shock and humiliation are present throughout *The Old Maid and the Thief* and Menotti’s other operas: he exploited these and other conventions of the minstrel show to make his operas more appealing. Also, Menotti seems to have exploited the conventions of African-American music for political reasons as well: he embraced these traditions in order to demonstrate his disdain for the fascist political regime in power in his native land, Italy. Like most great musicians and intellectuals of his time, Menotti no doubt hated Mussolini, Hitler and the fascist political systems that overtook Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. Menotti seems to have viewed American music as going hand in hand with its free and open political system: he saw America as the antidote to the totalitarian and indeed murderous political system of his native land. In this paper, I will demonstrate that the influence of natively American musical traditions transformed Menotti from an Italian composer into an American composer. Although Menotti was born in Italy and used the musical forms of great Italian composers throughout his life, his
works ultimately reflect the musical traditions of 19th century America more than those of Europe or elsewhere.
Early Life and Training

Born in 1911, Menotti spent his childhood in Italy, where he was an avid student of the piano, but then came to the United States at a very young age to study at the Curtis Institute. Much research on the life and work of Menotti has been done by the pianist and scholar Sylvia Watkins Ryan. Menotti’s gifts as a pianist and writer were evident at a very early age. As Ryan notes, Menotti’s musical gifts came from his mother, who allowed him to listen to her play Beethoven and Schubert at a very early age and nurtured his interest in music and writing. \(^2\)

Menotti spent his childhood years in Milan. From an early point, Menotti was just as interested in writing and the theater as in the piano. As a boy, he would often set Italian poetry to music. One of the first operas that he composed was *The Little Mermaid*, based on the Hans Christen Anderson tale. A mermaid, obviously, is an unnatural and inhuman creature: Menotti’s sheer choice of this subject demonstrates his fascination with the grotesque. He would continue to dramatize this theme throughout his career after coming to the United States. This fascination with the grotesque perhaps arose from the fact that he spent his childhood in Milan. Between World War I and World War II, the nation of Italy itself was something of a grotesque society. Its political and economic system was destroyed by World War I: this made possible the rise to

---

power of a fascist dictator such as Mussolini in the 1930s. Throughout his career, Menotti had a complicated relationship with his native land.

Unfortunately, neither Gian-Carlo nor his mother found the musical schools in Milan satisfactory. Gian-Carlo’s mother took him to the conductor Toscanini, who recommended that Gian-Carlo study in the United States. As has already been noted, Gian-Carlo’s move to America also seems to have reflected a dissatisfaction for the social and political climate of his native land—a theme that would resonate in his operas later in his career. Gian-Carlo chose to attend Curtis, from which he graduated at the age of 22 in 1933. Immediately after his graduation, he composed Amelia Goes to the Ball, which received a spectacular production at the New York City Metropolitan Opera: after this production of Amelia Goes to the Ball, Menotti’s fame and prowess as a composer in the United States were firmly established.

In an interview with Gene Brooks conducted in 1996 in Washington D.C., Menotti describes the sense of wonder that he felt when he first arrived at Curtis and heard the music of America: “It was a wonderful thing for me, because all of a sudden I found myself alone, in a foreign country, and in a musical surrounding that was so very different from Milan.”

Menotti thus clearly states that he found the musical environment of the United States enchanting. Amelia Goes to the Ball had a premier at the Metropolitan Opera in 1937: this established him firmly as a renowned composer. Yet as the Menotti biographer John Gruen notes, Amelia Goes to the Ball was the last opera that Menotti composed in Italian. As Gruen further observes, audiences and

---

3 Ibid, 9.
critics of the Metropolitan Opera had a strong preference for Italian operas at this time. After the production of this opera, Menotti seems to have abandoned his native language in favor of English. This seems to have reflected his disdain and hatred for the political climate of his native country, which at the time was embracing the fascist dictator Mussolini. As has already been noted, Menotti felt that he did not receive adequate musical training in Italy. He knew that only in America would he be free to practice his art free from the fear of persecution. It seems that Menotti was in awe of the United States and its atmosphere of tolerance and acceptance and, after graduating from Curtis, desired to compose uniquely American operas.
The Old Maid and the Thief

No discussion of Menotti’s use of the grotesque as a means of artistic expression would be complete without a lengthy discussion of *The Old Maid and the Thief*. *The Old Maid and the Thief* immediately succeeded *Amelia Goes to the Ball*. As has already been noted, *Amelia Goes to the Ball* was Menotti’s last Italian opera.\(^5\) *Amelia Goes to the Ball* was well-received by critics. After its premier at the Metropolitan Opera in 1937, Menotti received an invitation from the Italian minister of culture to discuss a possible Italian premier of the opera.\(^6\) It seems that Menotti declined this invitation because he rejected the Fascist party that was then in power in Italy. Instead, he moved further away from his connection to Italy and began to deepen his connection to the United States. When he was approached by the National Broadcasting Company, which to this day is known as the television network NBC, to compose an opera, he jumped at the opportunity. This invitation provided him the occasion to compose *The Old Maid and Thief*. As Gruen notes, the Metropolitan Opera at the time tended to perform Italian operas much more than American ones.\(^7\) Angry with Italy over its provincialism and its embrace of Mussolini, Menotti actively embraced American musical traditions when he composed *The Old Maid and the Thief*. Entitled a “Grotesque opera in 14 Scenes,” it embraces the traditions of the African-American minstrel show, which often depicted such vices as alcoholism. It makes absolute sense that in the year 1939, Menotti would embrace African-America musical and theatrical traditions. Mussolini, who was of course strongly connected to Hitler, was a right-

---

\(^5\) Ibid, 36.  
\(^6\) Ibid, 36.  
\(^7\) Ibid, 37.
wing, fascist dictator: racism was central to the political agenda of these two dictators. Menotti would have seen America and it sense of tolerance and multiculturalism as the antidote to the Fascism of Italy and Germany.

The plot of the *The Old Maid and the Thief* has clear debts to the African-American minstrel show. As the title demonstrates, the plot involves a thief who beguiles an old maid. The plot has many grotesque and shocking elements. Like many of Menotti’s operas, when it is staged, it comes off more as a play than as a piece of music. As the scholar Albert Mendoza notes, “The opera is composed in *opera buffa* style with fourteen discreet scene rather than a through-composed form.”

This division of the work into scenes makes the opera similar to Joplin’s *Treemonisha*: the opera is conceived as a play in a series of scenes and acts rather than as a through-composed musical work. The plot has many confusing and bewildering elements, such as an on-stage car chase and the robbing of a liquor store. What is also significant about *The Old Maid and the Thief* is that it is set in Menotti’s present day and place in 1939. It is clearly set in the 20th century: prior to the 20th century, there were no cars and liquor stores. Like Joplin’s *Treemonisha*, it is also clearly set in the United States. This American setting makes it different from Menotti’s later operas such as *The Consul* or *The Island God*, both of which are set in unnamed societies or places. As is evidenced by the car chase, the plot also involves modern technology.

---

Gruen also observes that the opera was innovative for its time in that it used microphones, loudspeakers and other such equipment.\textsuperscript{9} Menotti’s seems to have been intentionally making a statement in using modern equipment to produce his opera: he was defying the conventions of 19\textsuperscript{th} century Italian opera and deliberately embracing modern American technology. To this day, New York City Metropolitan Opera performances are expected to not be amplified. Audiences and critics do not typically expect or encourage the performers or producers to use microphones. The Metropolitan Opera is supposed to be high-brown entertainment; microphones are for low-brow performances. As has also been noted, \textit{The Old Maid and the Thief} takes place not in the distant past, but in present-day America. In doing so, he was defying the conventions of the Metropolitan Opera, which at the time was championing the operas of Mozart and Wagner. \textit{The Old Maid and the Thief} is not set in some mythological past, as the operas of Wagner, but in mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century America.

Menotti thus seems to have rejected the distinction between high-brown and low-brow music. According to Gruen, Menotti’s decisions were applauded by \textit{Newsweek} magazine. Gruen comments: “\textit{Newsweek} commented that within the span of an hour Menotti convinced thousands of listeners all over the country that English is really a great language to sing in, and that he also convinced his audience that microphones and loudspeakers can do a brilliant job of dispensing with the need for costumes, footlights and greasepaint.”\textsuperscript{10} As the \textit{Newsweek} review demonstrates,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{9} Ibid, 42.
\item \textsuperscript{10} Ibid, 42.
\end{itemize}
Menotti was deliberately rejecting his native Italian language in favor of English and embracing new technological equipment that the Metropolitan Opera would have rejected.

The 1939 performance of *The Old Maid and the Thief* thus demonstrates Menotti’s belief in American technological innovations as valid tools in operatic performance. Menotti’s defiance of the conventions of the New York City Metropolitan Opera seems to have had a political dimension. His rejection of the Met’s preference for Italian-language opera seems to have reflected his dissatisfaction with the current political environment of his native country, Italy. Much as he loved his native land, in 1939 he was angry with its political leadership. He perhaps was even angry with the Italian populace at large. He disapproved of the Italian people’s support of the dictator Mussolini. The American people, by contrast, were rallying behind a democratically elected leader, Franklin Roosevelt. Like Menotti himself, Franklin Roosevelt embraced the mass media. Just as Menotti broadcast *The Old Maid and the Thief* on NBC, Franklin Roosevelt broadcast his fireside chats on the radio throughout the United States. The use of the radio and national broadcasting made for a fair and open political climate.

Menotti thus knew that the dictatorial political regime that was in place in Italy in 1939 would never suffice in the 20th and 21st centuries. Only America and its new technologies and political and economic systems would suffice in the 20th century. It is not that Menotti rejected the techniques and forms of the Italian masters such as Donizetti. He actually loved Verdi and Donizetti more than the conservative leaders of the New York Metropolitan Opera did. But he also knew that under Mussolini, the great musical forms of the past would never be preserved. Only by embracing the new technologies and democratic political systems of America in the 20th
century could the great musical forms of the past be preserved. The NBC production of *The Old Maid and the Thief* was thus actually a great landmark in music history: it was a comic opera that employed the forms of the Italian masters of the 18th century and earlier but merged these forms with the new technologies of the 20th century. Menotti’s use of microphones and loudspeakers as well as his use of the National Broadcasting Company to produce *The Old Maid and Thief* demonstrated his faith in American technological innovation and its sense of progress.
Ricercare and Toccata and a Theme from The Old Maid and the Thief

No discussion of *The Old Maid and the Thief* would be complete without some discussion of Menotti’s most advanced piano composition, “Ricercare and Toccata on a Theme from *The Old Maid and the Thief.*” This piece is Menotti’s most technically challenging solo piano composition, and it reveals his gift for using the forms of the great European masters with a 20th century harmonic vocabulary. The work is dedicated to Ania Dorfmann, who premiered the composition in 1951. Written at approximately the same time as his opera *The Consul,* Menotti chose to compose this work over a decade after composing the opera *The Old Maid and the Thief,* at a time when he was reaching the height of his musical powers. The work has a clear debt to the preludes and fugues of J.S. Bach: the Ricercare is analogous to a prelude, and the Toccata to a fugue. However, the Ricercare has many elements of the fugue as a form as well. As Albert Menodoza comments, the ricercare was a keyboard form that existed in the 16th century and was rather free in form and character and was often improvised.\(^{11}\) Menotti’s choice of the Ricercare as a prelude to the Toccata demonstrates his interest in Bach and early keyboard composers. The 16th century was also the era in which Shakespeare was born—perhaps his use of the ricercare also demonstrates his interest in exploring the music that was being created during William Shakespeare’s lifetime. In the 1500s, when the ricercare as a form was born, the piano-forte did not even exist. The piano-forte was not invented until 1700 and was not in

common use until the very end of the 18th century. Menotti’s use of the ricercare demonstrates his interest in exploring and using the earliest musical forms for the keyboard. In contrast to the Toccata that follows, the Ricercare is slow and stately. It is a kind of fugue for four voices with a slow tempo. It begins in the exact same manner as a fugue: one voice states the principal theme, and then another voice enters with the same theme at a different interval. As it progresses, the piece becomes more elaborate and allows the performer to demonstrate his or her technical skills at the piano. However, there is a section in the middle that clearly has elements of a kind of jazz improvisation. The section even sounds like an improvisation using a different instrument than the piano, such as saxophone. Clearly, Menotti had been listening to the jazz performers in the classrooms at Curtis and incorporated their style and harmonic vocabulary into this composition. The composition clearly demonstrates Menotti’s genius for combining the harmonic language of 20th century jazz musicians with the forms of Bach and other early keyboard composers. In the manner of a Joplin rag, the Ricercare also does not end in the same key in which it begins.
The Minstrel Show

In order to understand the manner in which Menotti’s music reflects uniquely American musical traditions, one must examine the history of the American musical theater. An opera, after all, is a musical play. The history of America’s musical theater, one might argue, is entirely different than that of Europe. The operas of Verdi, Mozart, Puccini and Donizetti ultimately have their roots in the literature of ancient Rome. Whereas the roots of European opera are thus essentially Italian, the roots of American opera seem to be African.

Much research on the history of the American musical theater has been done by the scholar David Ewen. He argues that American musical theater was born just one or two decades prior to the Civil War. According to Ewen, the minstrel show was born in 1843 with the formation of the Virginia Minstrels. The Virginia Minstrels were actually white-skinned actors: nevertheless, these white actors imitated a form of entertainment created by black people. According to Ewen, the actors in the Virginia Minstrels engaged in both song and dance. They put black paint and their faces and dressed in striped coats and tails for their performances. It was an overtly racist form of entertainment. Illustrations of the black minstrel show may be seen on the covers of the published editions of Scott Joplin’s piano rags from the 1890s and early 1900s. The connection between the minstrel show and the solo piano rags of Scott Joplin is profound: the cover art to the published editions of Joplin’s sheet music feature depictions of either minstrel shows or of black people living on plantations in the South. The publisher John Stark

---

published the scores to Joplin’s rags with such racist depictions on the cover in order to market them to white amateur pianists. On the cover of one Joplin rag, black people are dressed in a coat and tails and going to a formal dance to which no black person prior to 1900 would have ever been invited. On the cover sheet to “The Entertainer,” a black person stands on the stage in a hat, coat and tails and is entertaining an audience in a grand theater. They are engaging the kind of theatrical performances that were given by the Virginia Minstrels in 1843. As the covers to Joplin’s rags illustrate, upper class white audiences must have delighted in watching black people humiliate themselves in this manner.

As Ewen notes, the musical accompaniment to the minstrel show was provided by the banjo. The accompaniment thus was most likely comprised of simple chord progressions. In fact, musical accompaniment to the minstrel show must have had a march-like element. Scott Joplin’s art, ragtime, reflected the influence of the banjo accompaniment to the minstrel show: a rag is strict march in 2/4 time. It is a kind of waltz in two. The actors in a minstrel show would have to step and march in time. The characters in the minstrel show, according to Ewen, had names such as Mr. Tambo or Mr. Interlocutor. Scott Joplin’s famous rag “The Entertainer” perhaps embodies the aesthetic of the minstrel show. One can almost see the characters stepping in strict 2/4 time. “The Entertainer” also captures the accompaniment provided by the banjo. According to Ewen, the Virginia Minstrels, during the “olio” section of the show, sat in a row on stage and the stood up to answer questions. Sometimes, a pair would stand up and dance.

---

13 Ibid, 2.
14 Ibid, 3.
15 Ibid, 3.
Above all, the sense of humiliation in the black-face minstrel show is profound, as is the sense of dark humor. Black people performed minstrel shows prior to the Civil War and during the remainder of the 19th century. Although the Virginia Minstrels were white actors dressed in blackface, the racist element of these shows is profound.

David Ewen and other historians argue that the first American musical to ever be staged was *The Black Crook*. The debt of this musical to the minstrel show is obvious: it premiered at the theater Niblo’s Garden in New York City on September 12, 1866.\(^{16}\) The show thus premiered one year after the ending of the Civil War. As almost all historians agree, Emancipation Proclamation freeing the slaves in the South did not genuinely alter the predicament of black people in the United States. America, at least in the South, would remain a racist society for another century, until the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s. The minstrel show provided one possible hope of survival for black people: by humiliating themselves and portraying themselves as stupid or even murderous, they could perhaps earn a living and avoid violence from such groups as the Ku Klux Klan. Like the operas of Menotti, *The Black Crook* has a supernatural element: according to Ewen, the musical is about a crook who agrees to deliver the Devil a human soul each year.”\(^{17}\) The show made a million dollars and had state-of-the-art stage effects and involved dance resembling ballet.\(^{18}\) The sets and special effects were spectacular and held the audience spell-bound. Furthermore, the chorus girls sang sexually suggestive songs, which caused many people to come to see the show. The plot itself actually made little sense, but the

\(^{16}\) Ibid, 4.  
\(^{17}\) Ibid, 4  
\(^{18}\) Ibid.
special effects, scenic flow and dance numbers nevertheless held the audience spellbound. The actors in *The Black Crook* were white, but obviously the plot is about some kind of black murderer who is after the actors in the play. As Ewen notes, the actual plot of the play itself made little sense to the audience.  

As is evidenced by the sheer titles of the works, there is clearly a connection between *The Black Crook* and Menotti’s *The Old Maid and the Thief*, although they were composed nearly a century apart. *The Black Crook* seems to have had several elements that profoundly influenced Menotti. The sheer fact that the plot of each show involves some sort of criminal who is after the actors on stage points to the element of the grotesque that is present in both shows. The element of a confusing plot is strongly present in both *The Black Crook* and *The Old Maid and the Thief*. The audience is supposed to be shocked and bewildered. After all, the plot of *The Old Maid and the Thief* involves the robbing of a liquor store. The sheer titles of *The Old Maid and the Thief* and *The Black Crook* suggest that the plot of both is centered upon some sort of criminal event. Furthermore, the use of spectacular stage effects in *The Black Crook* influenced Menotti’s aesthetic in *The Old Maid and the Thief*. As has already been noted, *The Old Maid and the Thief* involved the use of microphones and loudspeakers that amplified and distorted the actors’ voices. This may have also distorted the sound of the orchestra as well. Menotti’s emphasis on shocking stage effects thus has its roots in *The Black Crook* as well as the black minstrel show.

The first musical to ever be staged in the United States thus had clear racial elements and overtones. Whether Barras was actually a racist is unknown. Nevertheless, when the show

---

19 Ibid.
opened in 1866, the leading role was performed by either a black actor or a white actor in black face. Barras seems to have wanted to use the elements of the black minstrel show to create a spectacular musical play. In a way, *The Black Crook* actually honors the contributions of blacks to the history of the American theater. Like Barras, Gian-Carlo Menotti seems to have been fascinated by the history of the black minstrel show. When he composed *The Old Maid and the Thief*, Menotti was also following in the tradition of Scott Joplin in actually glorifying the elements of the black minstrel show. Menotti, like Joplin in *Treemonisha*, wanted to honor the musical traditions of black Americans by composing a show that exploited the traditions and conventions that had been created in the 19th century by black Americans. Joplin and Menotti both composed operas in the 20th century—the century in which it was hoped that racism would be eradicated. Joplin composed *Treemonisha* in 1911, just before World War I. Menotti composed *The Old Maid and the Thief* in 1939, just prior to the commencement of American involvement in World War II. World War II was fought, in particular, against fascist dictatorships that threatened the world. Both Joplin and Menotti saw America as having the free and open political system that Europe lacked. Like its political system, the music of America had its roots in the 19th century. Both Menotti and Joplin wanted to delve into the 19th century roots of American music and use them in 20th century operas. They knew that the fascist and totalitarian political systems of Europe would never suffice in the 20th and 21st centuries. They wanted to glorify American musical forms in the same manner as America’s free and open political system.
Although Menotti and Joplin both honored American musical traditions by using elements of the black minstrel show, there are important differences between Joplin and Menotti. As has been observed, *The Old Maid and the Thief* is set in the United States, in the same manner as Joplin’s *Treemonisha*. However, it should be noted that despite the American setting, Menotti’s sense of place in *The Old Maid and the Thief* is profoundly different from that of Joplin in *Treemonisha*. Whereas Joplin’s *Treemonisha* is set on a plantation in an America of the distant past, *The Old Maid and the Thief* is set in a modern American city. Joplin and his parents had both been born in the United States, whereas Menotti was an immigrant from Italy. Menotti’s sense of place is in *The Old Maid and the Thief* far more urban than Joplin’s in *Treemonisha*, which has a rural setting. Joplin seems to conceive of his ancestral roots as lying in either America or Africa, which are both treated as almost the same in *Treemonisha*. Italy actually had a far more urban history than the United States. Throughout the medieval period, Italy had been a series of city-states, including Venice, Florence and Menotti’s home city, Milan. During the period of the Roman Empire, Italy in fact had slavery in the same manner as America prior to the Civil War. Menotti also does not have seem to have had the same sense of affection for America’s past as Joplin. The conception of American life in *The Old Maid and the Thief* is bizarre and troubled. This sense of American life makes *The Old Maid and the Thief* profoundly different from *Treemonisha*, which is set in some kind of blissful and agricultural pre-urban America. *Treemonisha* has an agricultural setting and the characters are portrayed as close to nature. Whereas *Treemonisha* is set in an American South of the distant past, *The Old Maid and the Thief* seems to be set in mid-20th century New York City. Though Joplin and Menotti both celebrated American musical traditions, Menotti seems to have been far more perplexed by
American life than Joplin. He also seems to have been more fearful for America’s future. He questioned whether the unique freedoms that America offered him would endure into the twenty-first century.
The Island God

Menotti thus had a far more complicated relationship with his native land than Joplin. Whereas Joplin’s ancestral roots lay in Africa, Menotti’s lay in Italy. Italy in fact had been at war with Africa since ancient times, when the Romans under the emperor Augustus had conquered Carthage. Whereas *The Old Maid and the Thief* is set in the United States, Menotti decided to set his next opera, *The Island God*, on an island in the Mediterranean Sea. He composed this opera in 1942, when American involvement in World War II was at its peak. In creating *The Island God*, Menotti was attempting to musically and dramatically capture the mythology of Greece and Rome: according to Gruen, the plot involves two modern exiles stranded on an island in the Mediterranean, where they find the ruins of an ancient Greek temple and attempt to revive the gods of the Greeks and the Romans.\(^2\) *The Island God* is a serious operas, whereas *The Old Maid and the Thief* is comic. The element of the supernatural also figures very prominently in *The Island God*, as it does in *Treemonisha*, whereas this element is absent in *The Old Maid and the Thief*.

In sharp contrast to the financial success of *The Old Maid and the Thief*, *The Island God* was not a success at the box office. In this opera, Menotti seems to have attempted to return to the classical subjects of his native land of Italy: this attempt did not meet with success in the United States. Menotti, according the Gruen, actually stated, “[The Island God] is the only work

\(^{20}\) Gruen, 44.
I didn’t write for myself, but for other people. I wrote it for the critics.”21 Menotti seems to have been so displeased with his country’s behavior during the time of World War II that he wrote this opera in an attempt to in a sense rescue it and its heritage.

There is one other crucial difference between Joplin and Menotti: whereas Africa had egalitarian political traditions, Italy did not. The political culture of Africans in the American South was essentially communal: this is brilliantly dramatized in Treemonisha. Italy’s political traditions, by contrast, were far more authoritarian and dictatorial. Beginning in the first century AD, Italy was ruled by the Roman emperor Augustus. Throughout the medieval period and Renaissance, it had been ruled by a kind of oligarchy in which individual city states such as Venice and Florence vied for power. Only in the 19th and 20th centuries were there attempts to create a unified Italy. These attempts were largely unsuccessful and ultimately culminated in Mussolini’s rise to power in the 1930s. Mussolini stated that in rising to power and conquering territory for Italy, he was attempting to restore Italy to its ancient Roman glory. He was trying to re-create the Roman Empire. In fact, Mussolini invaded Ethiopia in 1942—the year in which The Island God premiered. Just as Augustus had conquered much of northern Africa in the 1st century AD, Mussolini in 1942 declared war on Ethiopia. Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia likely was just as much a cause of the United States’ entrance into World War II as Hitler’s invasion of Poland and France and the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor. Mussolini very likely invaded Ethiopia in order to antagonize the United States, which from the time of its origins had a large African population. In fact, Gruen observes: “In 1942 Menotti was still receiving financial aid

21 Gruen, 45
from his family in Italy, but Mussolini declared war on Ethiopia and all funds from Italy were stopped.” In other words, in 1942 Menotti began to experience financial difficulties as a result of Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia. Menotti thus loved the ancient culture of his fatherland, but at the same time saw America as its salvation. In fact, America was Menotti’s own salvation. Only in America did Menotti have the freedom to preserve the culture of his fatherland and oppose the fascism of Mussolini. From the moment of his arrival at Curtis in 1929, Menotti knew that only in America could he see to it the musical heritage of Italy, which ultimately came from ancient Rome, survive into the 21st century.
The Consul

Unlike Joplin, who passed away at the relatively early age of forty-nine in 1917, Menotti enjoyed a long and fruitful life and career. Born in 1911, Menotti lived well over 90 years, and passed away in 2007. There is no doubt that he celebrated the American victory in World War II. At the same time, he must have felt tremendous grief for the loss of so many American and Italian lives in the war. However, he was nevertheless happy that the United States had prevailed in World War II and rejoiced in the fact that American society and its unique freedoms would endure.

The postwar era in the United States witnessed tremendous political and social change, particularly with regard to African-Americans. The dominant theme in American life after the end of World War II became a quest for racial justice. The Civil Rights Movement began in the 1950s and continued in the 1960s. Like Martin Luther King Jr., John F. Kennedy Jr. was a great advocate of justice between the races. In fact, in 1961, Menotti met John F. Kennedy Jr. at the White House. Menotti seems to have been interested in celebrating the political system of America and its newfound sense of racial justice for the remainder of his career. After World War II, he had well over fifty years of composing left ahead of him. He could have turned to orchestral music as a dominant idiom, but did not. Instead, he continued to write primarily for the voice, composing only one piano concerto that is almost never performed today.

After the American victory in World War II, Menotti remained in the United States. He knew that America’s unique atmosphere of tolerance and acceptance would still provide him the best environment in which to create his art. In 1950, he staged one of his most famous and
controversial operas, *The Consul*. The first performance took place at the Ethel Barrymore Theater in New York City on March 15, 1950. Arturo Toscanini, who had been one of Menotti’s childhood mentors, was in the audience, and the opera won several Tony Awards. The opera was a financial success in 1950 and was revived many times. It also received the Pulitzer Prize and was staged later that year in London and Paris. Like all of Menotti’s post-World War II operas, Menotti wrote the original libretto in English. However, when the opera opened in Paris, the text was translated into French. The greatest English actor in the world at the time, Sir Lawrence Olivier, spoke at the London opening of the opera later that year. The opera was thus something of an international hit: it was a global phenomenon. According to Gruen, it also won the Drama Critics Circle Award for the year 1950. The triumph of *The Consul* at the Tony Awards demonstrates that Menotti was famed as a dramatist and musician alike: in fact, perhaps his lifelong goal was to be something of a musical dramatist. Judging by the sheer number of operas that he composed, perhaps he ultimately saw the theater or drama as opposed to music itself as his true life calling.

*The Consul* also was significant for Menotti in that it had a Milan premier in 1950 as well. Menotti viewed *The Consul* as his most complex and ambitious work to that point.

Considering that the title of the work alludes to ancient Roman history, it was a bold move for Menotti to stage the opera in Milan. Many of Menotti’s family members still lived in Italy and at the conclusion of World War II, the Italians had executed Mussolini. A democratic government

---

22 Gruen, 86.
23 Ibid, 88.
24 Gruen, 98.
was established in Italy after World War II. Still, the Communist party was active in the country and members of the party held seats in Parliament. In the 1950s in the United States, the McCarthy era was beginning, and all American actors and musicians were terrified of being labelled as Communists. According to Life magazine, Menotti journeyed to his home city of Milan to direct the Italian premier of The Consul himself in 1950. In Life, the writer Tom Prideaux described the process of staging The Consul in Milan:

Optimistically Menotti accepted an invitation to stage The Consul at La Scala...Menotti plunged into his job of directing rehearsals, which went on daily for almost two months. It was hard enough to enlarge The Consul—an intimate opera on Broadway—to fill the vast La Scala stage...The singers were cooperative but dumbfounded when Menotti asked them to act intensely on stage...Before opening night, there were darker mutterings in the musical circles of Milan. Many Italians were resentful that Menotti had won his fame in the U.S. The Communists resented the libretto.25

Menotti thus directed the Italian premier of The Consul himself. He risked offending his native countrymen when he staged The Consul in Milan. Menotti was not a film composer, but he nevertheless risked being blacklisted as a possible Communist in show business in the United States by staging an opera that opposed totalitarian systems of government. The staging was significant in that prior to World War II, Menotti had not wanted to return to Italy to stage operas; after World War II, his attitude changed. He in fact returned to his home city to stage this opera. After the defeat of Mussolini’s regime in World War II, Italy in 1950 was now a unified nation. Throughout most of history, Italy had been a series of warring city-states: now it was a unified nation with a representative government similar to that in place in England and the

United States. After World War II, it was the United States that was now at risk of becoming a totalitarian society. In the 1950s, there was paranoia about Communism everywhere in the United States. The United States in fact had a long tradition of fearing Communism and Anarchism: the Red Scare during the 1920s was evidence of this. Having emerged victorious in World War II, the United States was now in danger of becoming an empire in the manner of ancient Rome.

In composing *The Consul*, Menotti was actually expressing his fears about the United States, which had provided him an excellent musical education at Curtis and had given him a free atmosphere in which to practice his art. After World War II, however, the United States was in a dominant position in the world, and its history of enslaving the blacks had not yet been corrected: this would not occur until after the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. In its foreign policy, the United States continued to oppose Communist governments throughout the world: the Korean and Vietnam Wars were evidence of this. Menotti knew that the American fear of Communism was its weakness: in composing *The Consul*, he was expressing his fear about the way that America and its unique system of government could come to an end. The sheer title of the work alludes to the system of government that was in place in ancient Rome before the period of Christ, Caesar and Augustus.

Before Rome expanded and became an empire under Caesar in the 1st century AD, it had been a small city-state with a republican or democratic system of government. There was a legislative body, the senate, the members of whom were elected by the general populace. At the head of the government were two consuls, who oversaw state affairs but did not have absolute power; rather, power lay with the Senate, which represented the populace at large. Menotti was
thus clearly aware of the fact that America’s system of government as it had been conceived in the 18th century was based on the government of ancient Rome. Over the course of the 1st century AD, the Roman system of government changed profoundly from a democratic republic into an imperial dictatorship. In approximately 60 AD, Julius Caesar proclaimed himself leader of Rome and conquered much of Gaul, which is now France. After his assassination, an even more powerful leader emerged, Augustus, who transformed Rome into an empire and expanded Roman role over all of what is now Europe, Northern Africa, Greece and Turkey. Historians today tend to view Augustus as a kind of benevolent dictator who did more to safeguard peace for the world’s population than hinder it. Vergil, Rome’s greatest poet, praised Augustus and composed *The Aeneid*, an epic poem telling the story of Rome’s history beginning with the fall of Troy and culminating in the founding of the city-state of Rome, in his honor.

In composing *The Consul*, Menotti was at once reminding the audience of Roman history and at the same time offering serious commentary on the American system of government as it existed in 1950. Like the Roman Empire under Augustus, America had recently won a world war and in a way triumphed over much of the world. Unlike Rome, America did not claim those nations as belonging to it or build some kind of worldwide American Empire. It did, however, finance the rebuilding of Europe under the Marshall Plan.

After World War II, America’s chief rival became the Soviet Union. According to Gruen, “*The Consul* takes place in an unnamed demagogic country—which has been variously interpreted as Communist or Fascist.”26 In composing *The Consul*, Menotti seems to have been

26 Ibid, 87.
expressing his fear about the dangers of America’s newfound power in the world. Menotti was concerned about whether America could be in a dominant position in the world and still be a free and democratic society. In composing *The Consul*, Menotti was praying not for Italy, but for the United States. The United States put in place democratic governments in Europe in the 1950s under the Marshall Plan, but also intervened in the affairs of nations throughout the world. Its fear of Communism was a costly one: the military conflicts in Vietnam and Korea during the 1950s and 1960s, both of which occurred out of a fear of Communism, cost tremendous financial resources. In composing *The Consul* and later works, Menotti was thus expressing his fear about the possibility of America becoming a kind of empire. He saw America as the greatest civilization the world had ever known, but he knew that its fear of Communism and its history of racial intolerance were its weaknesses.

What is also significant about *The Consul* is that it is a serious and dramatic, not a comic, opera. As has already been demonstrated, it has strong political overtones. As has been stated, Menotti was attempting to warn audiences about the dangers of totalitarian systems of government. It is for this reason that Menotti saw *The Consul* as perhaps his most important and most complex opera. However, the opera seems to almost be more like a play than a musical. In an interview conducted many years after the premier of the work, Menotti stated:

> Of all my works, *The Consul* was written the quickest. I was very much inspired. The orchestration of *The Consul* is very sparse. Every conductor who has ever done it has urged me to enrich the orchestration. They feel that for a large opera house, where it is generally given, it needs a richer sound. But I rather like the sparseness, which allows the text to be understood…The opera starts with a popular song, sung in French.27

---

27 Ibid, 98.
Menotti clearly wanted the orchestration of the opera to be “sparse” and not rich. The sparse orchestration would allow the opera to come off more as a play than a musical. As he states, the sparse orchestration allows the “text to be understood.” By staging an opera that is almost a play in a great opera house, Menotti could call attention to the dark nature of his subject: he could warn audiences about the dangers of absolutist regimes. When it was staged at the Ethel Barrymore in the United States in 1950, the point of the opera must have been clear: America after World War II was in danger of becoming a kind of empire and of collapsing in the manner of ancient Rome. Fortunately, Americans seem to have heeded Menotti’s warnings and the United States did live on into the 21st century. However, it was the establishment of racial justice in the 1950s and 1960s that preserved the life of the United States. Ultimately, just after Menotti’s death, the life of the United States was also saved by the election of the first great black president, Barrack Obama, which fulfilled the promise of the Civil Rights Movement and made sure that America would remain a free and just society into the 21st century and beyond.
Later Works

As has already been noted, Menotti was profoundly influenced by African-American music and he therefore must have rejoiced in the Civil Rights Movement that occurred in the 1950s and 1960s. There is no question that both Menotti and Scott Joplin, in their later works, view America as their salvation and equate it with Heaven or the hereafter.

As has already been shown, it is significant that Scott Joplin wrote his great *magnum opus*, the opera *Treemonisha*, in the final years of his life. The final two numbers of Scott Joplin’s *Treemonisha* predict the election of a great black political leader. In “We Will Trust You as Our Leader,” the chorus of *Treemonisha* elects the leading actress as a leader and promises that they will trust in her forever. The ending of *Treemonisha* is magnificent: the full scope and caliber of Scott Joplin’s genius is revealed by this scene. The final number is entitled “Marching Onward”: the text actually celebrates what makes Scott Joplin’s form of ragtime so beautiful. The stage directions are written into the score: Treemonisha joins hands with her fellow people. Treemonisha and her friend Lucy sing a duet, and soon the entire chorus joins them:

> Marching onward, marching onward, marching to that lovely tune.  
> Marching onward, marching onward, happy as a bird in June.  
> Sliding onward, sliding onward, listen to that rag.  
> Hop and skip and do that slow drag.\(^\text{28}\)

In assigning Treemonisha these words, Joplin is actually celebrating his own gift for melody. He is describing the “lovely tune” of ragtime and predicting the way in which music would be the answer to the question of America’s fate. All of the actors in Treemonisha are black, since the characters are black people. The opera could not be successfully staged until the 1970s, after the conclusion of the Civil Rights movement. The scene, however, clearly predicts the election of a great black musical leader who would assure that all good Americans who ever existed would be elevated into a kind of heavenly kingdom. The text itself offers a glimpse of the hereafter: the people are described as “marching” on accompanied by a “lovely tune.” As it was staged in the 1970s, the final number offers a glimpse of what the hereafter might look like as well: a great chorus in which everyone joins hands and sings to an unseen musical accompaniment. Everyone in the scene has black skin as well: perhaps this is our ultimate human form and the form in which we present ourselves to God. Unlike the orchestration of The Consul, which is sparse, the orchestration of Treemonisha is rich and full.

Perhaps the most important distinction to note between Treemonisha and the operas of Menotti is that Treemonisha is something of a religious drama, whereas Menotti’s operas are not. Treemonisha is ultimately a kind of female Christ figure who is trusted to lead her people to salvation. The sense of religion in Menotti’s works is ultimately different and perhaps more complex than in Joplin’s. As has been observed, The Island God deals with the pagan gods of the Greeks and Romans. Perhaps more importantly, whereas Menotti wrote many liturgical works, Joplin did not. Following in the tradition of Mozart, Menotti composed many religious choral works in addition to non-religious operas. Of particular significance is Menotti’s cantata The Death of the Bishop of Brindisi, which was composed in 1963, the year in which John F.
Kennedy, Jr. was assassinated. Menotti’s choice of subject for this cantata has profound significance: as Gruen observes, the libretto tells the story of the Children’s Crusade of 1212. This crusade was one of many attempts by the Catholic Church to re-capture in the Holy Land of Israel. Like all of the Christian crusades during the medieval period, this crusade was particularly violent and horrific.

Menotti was very much aware of the Catholic Church’s history of violence and how it actually convinced nations and armies to wage wars to recapture Israel from the Muslims. The Children’s Crusade of 1212 was one of history’s most horrific religious wars. Some 30,000 children were sent unaccompanied and armed to recapture the Holy Land. Most of the children perished. *The Death of the Bishop of Brindisi* had profound contemporary significance: during World War II, Hitler and Mussolini had killed countless children in the Holocaust. The Holocaust was aimed particularly at Jews, but at homosexuals as well. The Catholic Church in the Vatican did very little to oppose the regimes of Mussolini and Hitler and did not open its doors to Jewish people seeking shelter from German or Italian soldiers. The United States had ultimately overthrown Hitler’s regime, but not until he, with Mussolini’s support, had killed over 6 million Jews and homosexuals in the Holocaust. In composing *The Death of the Bishop of Brindisi*, Menotti may have actually been condemning organized religion itself. He most certainly was condemning the fact that World War II had strong religious overtones.

Christ had come from Israel, but the Catholic Church from approximately 300 AD under the emperor Constantine was based in the Vatican in Rome. Menotti thus realized that the

---

29 Gruen, 166.
Catholic Church was essentially Italian and was troubled by this fact. Menotti even stated that he never went to church or prayed during the course of his life.\textsuperscript{30} In spite of this, he wrote a tremendous amount of religious music—in contrast to Scott Joplin, who wrote music mainly for the purpose of entertainment. Whereas Joplin wrote no masses or cantatas, Menotti composed not only \textit{The Death of the Bishop of Brindisi}, but countless other religious works including a mass \textit{Missa O pulchritudo}. As has already been noted, after \textit{Amelia Goes to the Ball}, all of Menotti’s librettos were in English. The exception to this was the \textit{Missa O pulchritudo} and other choral works, which he wrote in Latin. After the second Vatican Council in 1960, the Catholic Church no longer required masses to be spoken in Latin. Menotti nevertheless composed the libretto to the \textit{Missa O pulchritudo} in Latin: he seemed to be attempting to compose works in the language not only of Christ, but of the ancient Romans, who were his true ancestors. By the end of his life, Menotti seems to have been attempting to articulate his own religious beliefs in his works. The sheer fact that he gave an interview with the American Choral Directors Association in 1997 indicates that he became profoundly involved with choral and religious music later in life. Perhaps Menotti and Joplin were both ultimately alike in that they celebrated America’s unique atmosphere of religious freedom and its strict separation of church and state. However, Menotti ultimately was more of a religious composer than Joplin, and Menotti actually may not have achieved the same degree of fame and recognition during or after his lifetime as Joplin.

\textsuperscript{30} Gruen, 166.
Conclusion

What is perhaps most significant about Menotti’s career is that as he neared its end, he was clearly celebrating America’s tradition of choral singing. Perhaps this was the sense in which he became an American composer. In the 1990s and 2000s, Menotti remained profoundly involved with the American Choral Directors Association. Perhaps he saw American choral singing as an expression of what he loved most about the United States: its freedom and its children. After all, the ACDA is an association of primarily American high school and college choral directors as well as church choral directors. Menotti ultimately viewed all American musicians as children under God, whether or not that God is Christ, and viewed every life as sacred. As Menotti notes in the interview with Gene Brooks of the ACDA, he in fact accepted a commission from the Catholic University of America in Washington D.C. to compose and stage the Missa O pulchritudo.\textsuperscript{31} Menotti in fact stated: “I love to write for the voice because I like to breathe with my music…When I write my librettos I always sing the words.”\textsuperscript{32} Menotti thus reveals that singing is as natural to him as breathing and that he composes by singing the text of his compositions as well as by playing the piano.

Having immigrated to the United States fleeing the persecution of homosexuals that was occurring in Italy under Mussolini, Menotti lived a long and fruitful life in the United States. By the end of his life, he came to realize America, not Italy, had provided him the opportunity to live such a long life. Though he met John F. Kennedy Jr., he probably never became genuinely rich. His operas were never as popular as those of Stephen Sondheim, Leonard Bernstein or

\textsuperscript{31} Menotti, 12.  
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid, 12.
Andrew Lloyd Webber. Though he died in 2007 and did not actually witness the election of America’s first great black president, he must have rejoiced in the prospect of a great black leader, Barrack Obama, being elected during the final months of his life. There is no question that he ultimately saw choral singing and piano playing as central to his own salvation. One of the last works that he composed was for the American Choral Directors Association; it was entitled *Jacob’s Prayer*. The basis for this choral work was a poem that he composed:

> As sunlight darkened the obscured angel appeared and I was challenged.  
> All night long I wrestled with him.  
> Not a word was said as our breath mingled and our limbs entwined.  
> How easy it would have been to lie vanquished under his beating wings.  
> But I fought. I fought all night.  
> I knew that only at dawn God’s face would be revealed to me and that the light of life like a surging wave would again enfold me.  
> I knew that God’s face would not shine on me if I surrendered.  
> I did not lose or win, but I was wounded by the glory of God and by this wound I am spurred and guided toward the beckoning light.  
> O God, let me not die in darkness, but let me be swept away toward the celestial harbor by love’s bright waves.  
> Amen.  

Considering that Menotti stated in another interview that he never prayed during the course of his life, this is a powerful poem. Cleary, the poem takes the form of a prayer, and concludes with an Amen. It seems clear from this poem that, like Joplin, Menotti equates America itself with Heaven or the hereafter. This poem gives clear evidence of the fact that Menotti became an American composer over the course of his life: this poem is entirely in English and describes the heavenly beauty of the United States. In this poem, he describes musical composition or practice as a kind of fight or struggle with an angel. America is not specifically mentioned verbatim, but

---

33 Ibid, 13.
the “celestial harbor” refers to the pilgrimage or journey by boat that all immigrants from Europe made across the Atlantic to seek freedom in America during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Menotti does not identify God specifically as Christ, but in this poem he is clearly attempting to see God’s face, which is impossible to see in the beaming “sunlight.” He seems to be describing the process of composing music—perhaps specifically music at the piano. He views it as an arduous, almost torturous, process. He describes it as a kind of fight with oneself, as he states: “I fought. I fought all night.” He states that he composes his music in anguish at night, only to wake up at dawn and see “God’s face revealed” to him. Menotti is in fact becoming one with God or Christ Himself as he wrestles with the powers of light and darkness. Menotti thus seems to be describing musical composition or performance as a pathway to Heaven itself and in fact equates this process with his own journey as an immigrant to the United States. He identifies the process of practicing or composing music at the piano as a form of prayer in which one struggles and agonizes and summons the full force of one’s being and ultimately arrives at some kind of “celestial harbor,” which is the shores of America itself or Heaven. He ultimately sees America as a kind of musical nation and rejoices in the playing of American music. By fighting with this musical angel, he gradually acquires its powers. By practicing music, he becomes one with God himself and sees God’s face revealed to him.

In conclusion, it seems that the musical traditions of America profoundly influenced Menotti. When he arrived at Curtis in 1933, he heard musical sounds from jazz and other popular idioms that he could never have heard in Milan. He thus came to realize that America’s music gives America its atmosphere of freedom. No other country in the world is as musically free as the United States. Menotti’s genius was for using the forms of the great European composers and
combining those forms with the harmonic language of African-American music, jazz and other popular idioms. Though he may not have been a Christian per se, he most certainly believed in God. When he fled persecution in Italy, he found shelter and salvation in the United States. This is why he chose to honor the musical traditions of America, from African-American minstrel singing to jazz, in his operas and compositions: America had saved his life, and had also provided him the freedom to practice his art without fear of persecution.

Both Menotti and Joplin would have been delighted to see Barrack Obama take the oath of office in 2008 and witness the fulfillment of the promise of equality between the races. Abraham Lincoln had sacrificed his life in order to preserve the life of the United States and assure that one day, blacks and whites would be treated equally: Gian Carlo Menotti and Scott Joplin had in a way done the same thing. Today, all children recite the Pledge of Allegiance in school: they pledge their faith to the United States and to God, whoever they hold Him to be. They are in effect swearing to be faithful to America as one great musical nation. Menotti states: “O God, let me not die in darkness, but let me be swept away toward that celestial harbor by love’s bright waves.” In the United States, people do not genuinely die, but instead hear the sound of American music and see God’s face, which ushers them into a new life either on Earth or in Heaven.
Bibliography


