

Menotti's Beasts Make Rare Appearance

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Unicorns, gorgons and manticores are rare enough. Gian Carlo Menotti's "madrigal fable" "The Unicorn, the Gorgon and the Manticore" is far less often performed than his operas, which include the hugely popular "Amahl and the Night Visitors."

Commissioned by the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation at the Library of Congress where it was premiered in 1956 (five years after "Amahl"), it shares the charm of "Amahl" and its ability to appeal to audiences on more than one level. (Former Cincinnati Symphony music director Thomas Schippers led the New York City premiere with the New York City Ballet in 1957, Rivers said.) The work is hard to program because it doesn't fit neatly into one category, requiring chorus, dancers and chamber ensemble in equal measure.

A set of 12 madrigals with instrumental interludes, the elusive "Unicorn" was expertly and engagingly brought to life Saturday night at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music's Corbett Auditorium by the Vocal Arts Ensemble in collaboration with the CCM dance division and CCM Chamber Players. VAE music director Earl Rivers, head of the division of ensembles and conducting at CCM, conducted.

The VAE program, the last for Rivers who is retiring after 20 years as VAE music director, began with a set of modern madrigals by Morton Lauridsen and William Hawley and Eric Whitacre's colorful "opera breve" "Leonardo Dreams of His Flying Machine." Guest choir was Cincinnati Children's Choir's Bel Canto Choir in a set of their own led by CCC conductor Robyn Lana.

Menotti based his "Unicorn" on the commedia dell'arte-influenced madrigal comedy (an ancestor of opera exemplified by Orazio Vecchi's 1507 "L'Amfiparnaso"). The story, told by the chorus and acted by the dancers, is loosely autobiographical, having to do with the conflict between artists and critics (and the fickle public). Menotti, who died last year at age 95, was a musical conservative who resisted mid-20th-century atonality and took – and gave -- lots of heat for it. The music is tonal, reflecting 16th-century practices, with a clearly modern

edge.

A reclusive, but well-respected poet emerges from his castle now and then for "Sunday walks" in the village. The townsfolk are amazed and be-dazzled when he appears one Sunday with a unicorn. Beginning with a haughty, petulant Countess who bedevils her husband to indulge her wishes, the villagers decide to adopt unicorns, too. On his next visit, the poet is seen with a gorgon (think Medusa). Deciding that unicorns are passé, the Countess dispatches her unicorn and persuades her husband to get her a gorgon. The villagers follow suit.

When the poet arrives again, this time accompanied by a manticore (part man, part lion), the villagers are outraged. The poet is killing his pets, they say, and they march to his castle to protest his cruelty. They find him dying with all three beasts by his side. The beasts represent his creative phases, youth, maturity and old age, and he scolds the townspeople for adhering to "fashion" and failing to respect the work of the artist.

The 26-voice VAE and 9-piece Chamber Players (flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, trumpet, cello, double bass, harp and percussion) occupied the rear of the stage. A dozen dancers (CCM's choreography class?) acted out the story in front of them. The beasts wore fanciful costumes, a silver horn and muzzle for the unicorn, a wig topped by golden snakes for the gorgon and a feline mask for the manticore. The ballet was superb, the dancers mirroring the action delightfully. The unicorn "pranced," the gorgon swaggered, the manticore pawed and scratched. The poet (in poet's shirt) sat to one side reading a book at the outset. His interaction with the villagers was dignified as well as dismissive, theirs frivolous and carefree. The Count and Countess sparred hilariously, he carrying her off kicking (and presumably screaming) at one point. The unicorn and gorgon were each dragged away unceremoniously after the Countess rid herself of them.

The VAE told the story with zest and good humor, evoking the laughter, grief and mock-seriousness of Menotti's sharp dialogue. The poet's farewell was touching as he reminded the villagers "you, not I, are the indifferent killers of the poet's dreams."

The Chamber Players manifested considerable skill in the challenging score.

The VAE opened with two of Lauridsen's 1987 "Fire Songs" on Renaissance poems (the fire being that of romantic love). "Ov'e lass', il Bei Viso?" ("Where is the beautiful face?") and "Io Piango" ("I'm weeping") were both bittersweet, the latter ending in a soft, sorrow-tinged dissonance. "Fuggi, fuggi, dolor" ("Flee, flee, sorrow") from

Hawley's 2000 "Tre Rimo de Tasso" followed suit beautifully.

Whitacre's 2001 "Leonardo Dreams," about Leonardo Da Vinci dreaming of flight, utilizes fragments of Italian from his notebooks, interleaved with English text. The VAE gave it a vivid reading, complete with vocal "whooshing" to simulate air and percussive effects (hand drum and finger cymbals).

The young Bel Canto Singers contrasted Z. Randall Stroope's serene "Lux Aeterna" with Rossini's swirling "La Danza," then -- hand-in-hand -- New York City composer Jim Papoulis' folkish "Stand Together" with hand drum and piano.

The concert closed with the combined choirs in Mormon Tabernacle Choir associate director Mack Wilberg's setting of the American folk hymn "We'll Shout and Give Him the Glory" with piano four-hands.

The concert repeats at 4 p.m. Sunday (March 2) at St. Margaret of York Catholic Church in Loveland with guest choir the York Youth Singers.