

MENOTTI

THE MEDIUM

THE TELEPHONE

J. Samsonova-Khayet
M. Santoro
C. Isotton
L. Grante
R. Herrera Diaz
E. Hertzberg
Cast selected from
amongst artists on the
Raina Kabavainska Masterclass

Orchestra Filarmonica Italiana
Flavio Emilio Scogna *conductor*



Gian Carlo Menotti 1911-2007

The Medium

Tragedy in two acts

words and music by Gian Carlo Menotti

published by G. Schirmer, Inc. New York

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|-----------|-------|
| 1. Act I | 31'03 |
| 2. Act II | 34'04 |

Monica (daughter of Madame Flora):

Marily Santoro*

Madame Flora (Baba): Julija

Samsonova-Khayet*

Mrs. Gobineau: Chiara Isotton*

Mr. Gobineau: Lorenzo Grante*

Mrs. Nolan: Roxana Herrera Diaz*

Voice off stage: Arianna Manganello*

ORCHESTRA FILARMONICA
ITALIANA

Flavio Emilio Scogna *conductor*

1. The Telephone

or L'amour à trois

24'58

Opera buffa in one act

words and music by Gian Carlo Menotti

published by G. Schirmer, Inc. New York

Lucy: Elizabeth Hertzberg*

Ben: Lorenzo Grante*

music assistant: Paolo Andreoli

language coach: Paul Angus

ORCHESTRA FILARMONICA
ITALIANA

1st violins: Cesare Carretta
(*concertmaster*), Nicola
Tassoni, Ekaterina Reut,
Michaela Bilikova

2nd violins: Antonio Lubiani, Giacomo
Trevisani, Alessandro
Cosentino, Risako Honda

Viola: Monica Vatrini,
Davide Bravo, Erica Mason

Cello: Claudio Giacomazzi,
Elena Castagnola

Contrabass: Andrea Sala

Flute: Maurizio Saletti

Oboe: Fabrizio Oriani

Clarinet: Ivan Sanz Villar

Bassoon: Luca Reverberi

Percussion: Alessandro Perissinotto,
Stefano Barbato

Pianoforte: Marco Santità,
Elisa Montipò

Paolo Mandelli *president*

Arianna Azzolini *organization and
artistic production*

Flavio Emilio Scogna *conductor*

* cast selected from amongst artists on
the Raina Kabaivanska Masterclass
(Istituto Superiore di Studi Musicali
"O. Vecchi-Tonelli"), Modena (Italy)



Recording: 14 March 2018, Teatro Comunale Luciano Pavarotti, Modena, Italy

Sound engineer and producer: Giovanni Caruso

Musical supervision: Giovanni Caruso and Gisela Lopez

Editing: Mattia Ometto

Photographer: Rolando Paolo Guerzoni

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The comic and the tragic

Giancarlo Menotti was born into a family involved in music, the theatre and various art forms. He was already writing verse at the age of seven, and by the time he was eleven had composed two operas, *The Death of Pierrot* and *The Little Mermaid*, based on tales by Hans Christian Andersen. When he moved to the United States, it was Arturo Toscanini who interceded to obtain a place for him at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. While he was studying there he got to know Samuel Barber, who in 1933 accompanied him on the classic grand tour of Europe, thereafter sharing much of his life with him. In 1936 in Vienna Menotti began writing the opera *Amelia al ballo*, which he completed later in the USA. The work was first staged in Philadelphia in 1937, and the following year at the Metropolitan, meeting with such acclaim that the NBC commissioned him to write an opera for the radio. The outcome was *The Old Maid and the Thief*, which was broadcast for the first time in 1939.

Within the space of a few years Menotti had made a name for himself as an opera composer, receiving a number of awards for his work. In 1946 the Alice Ditson Fund commissioned him to write *The Medium*, which premiered to considerable acclaim on 8 May of that same year at Columbia University's relatively small Brander Matthews Theater. Among those impressed by the composition were producers Efrem Zimbalist and Chandler Cowles, who encouraged Lincoln Kirstein, general director of the Ballet Society (as from 1948 the New York City Ballet) to include the short "tragedy in two acts" as part of the opera season. To this end, Kirstein asked Menotti to add a further single act work to complete the evening. The outcome was *The Telephone, ou l'amour à trois*, a short, heady "comic opera in one act" composed in the space of just a few weeks that proved to be just the right light-hearted counterweight to *The Medium*. The two operas were staged at the Heckscher Theater in New York on 18 February 1947, and then from 1 May in a slightly extended version at the Ethel Barrymore Theater on Broadway, where they enjoyed a long run consisting of 211 performances.

The success in America was followed by similar popularity in Europe. From 1948

the two operas were performed jointly in London and Paris, and the following year *The Medium* was staged in Genoa in a production directed by the composer himself. In 1951 a film was made of the opera, set in Italy and presented at the Venice Film Festival. Yet the composition that best withstood the test of time proved to be *The Telephone*, precisely because it was so easy to produce and pair with other one-act operas.

Menotti did not see eye to eye with the musical avant-garde of the time, and often found himself involved in heated arguments with composers such as Luigi Nono and Pierre Boulez, who described him as "the Puccini of the poor". Proud to describe himself as a conservative composer, his idiom was eclectic, mannered and indeed clearly influenced by Puccini, Mussorgsky, Debussy and Stravinsky. He happily adopted different styles and materials, and his music was fluidly eloquent and communicative, which of course explains why it was so successful. Yet Menotti's skill as an opera composer was also the fruit of his direct knowledge and experience of the theatre. He had worked as an actor and playwright, and he wrote all the librettos for his operas, as well directing many of the various productions. Moreover, he wrote a number of plays, including *A Copy of Madame Aupic* and *The Leper*, and three librettos for other composers: *Introductions and Good-byes* for Lukas Foss, and *Hand of Bridge* and *Vanessa* for Samuel Barber. Because he conceived of the opera as inseparable from the libretto, and the music from the plot, he was able to create scenes full of descriptive detail and dramatic impact, almost as though he were directing a movie. Yet he also believed that the voice had to be central to all of this, and did not spare criticism for colleagues who treated it like a mere instrument. Menotti's operas thus feature grand arias, dramatic recitative and coloratura.

The Medium is a dramatic, psychologically probing work that revolves around a clairvoyant who is devastated by coming into contact with a supernatural world. Menotti had been toying with the idea for the opera since 1936, when he spent time in the village of St. Wolfgang near Salzburg. His neighbours had invited him to take part in a séance, and although at the outset he was somewhat sceptical, in the end

he agreed. The experience proved to be somewhat disquieting, however: «Although I was unaware of anything unusual, it gradually became clear to me that my hosts, in their pathetic desire to believe, actually saw and heard their dead daughter Doodly (a name, incidentally, which I have retained in the opera). It was I, not they, who felt cheated. The creative power of their faith and conviction made me examine my own cynicism and led me to wonder at the multiple texture of reality». The story concerns Madame Flora (contralto) who organizes psychic séances with the help of her daughter Monica (Soprano) and Toby, a mute servant boy the family rescued from the streets of Budapest. Together they receive the clients: Mrs Nolan (mezzosoprano), who hears the voice of her daughter Doodly, and Mr and Mrs Gobinau (baritone and soprano), who want to communicate with their deceased two-year-old son Mickey. In actual fact the voices the guests hear come from Monica, hidden in the dark. And in the dark Flora feels a phantom hand clutching at her throat and is terror-stricken, imagining it to be Toby, whom she threatens and ultimately shoots as he hides behind a curtain.

In a note written for the recording of *The Medium* released by Columbia, Menotti analyses the way Flora falls apart mentally: «Despite its eerie setting and gruesome conclusion, *The Medium* is actually a play of ideas. It describes the tragedy of a woman caught between two worlds, a world of reality which she cannot wholly comprehend, and a supernatural world in which she cannot believe. She has no scruples in cheating her clients...until something happens which she herself has not prepared. This insignificant incident, which she is not able to explain, shatters her self-assurance and drives her almost insane with fear. From this moment on, she rages impotently against her still credulous clients, who are serene in their naive and unshakable faith, and against Toby...who seems to hide within his silence the answer to her unanswerable question.»

In the score Menotti combines different musical registers to create a mirror structure in which the second act is the negative version of the first. The dissonant harmonic development underlines the fragility of the border between reality and the

imagination by means of the varied timbres of the 14-element instrumental ensemble. The sound fabric is both heterogeneous and compact, with a sense of well-handled timing involving both impressionist passages built around skilfully distorted thematic material and a voice line that is always in the foreground. Although the role of Monica is relatively simple in its positive, sunny nature, it actually comprises different vocal genres that range from the chimeric voices of her fake apparitions (for instance, when she conjures up the dead Doodly with «Mammy, you must not cry») to the carefree, playful moments she spends with Toby or the dramatic outcry when she defends him from her mother's fury, or indeed the melancholy ballad of *The Black Swan*, which she sings to console her mother at the end of the first act: a cradling, modal melody that unfurls over a slow rhythm spelled out by the tambourine, with the mother's voice in juxtaposition through to the *Ave Maria* and the faint, sinister laugh of the woman that throws Flora into a state of panic. By contrast, the character of Madame Flora, whom her daughter calls Baba, undergoes a complete metamorphosis during the course of the opera. To begin with she comes across as a determined matriarch who exercises firm control over both the two children and her clients. But once she comes into contact with the supernatural, she turns into a woman full of anxiety and self-doubt. This transition from what for her (but not for her clients) was mere routine to a state of anguish (when she feels the hand grabbing at her throat) is underlined by sudden musical slides. The light, airy instrumental figurations that accompany the appearance of Mickey immediately give way to short elements in the wind and percussion instruments that conjure up the touch of the hand, and rapid arpeggios on the piano that correspond to the woman's terror. From this point on the dramatic climate of the piece grows more intense, passing from the gloomy mood of the séance to the increasingly agitated, fragmented interrogation of the wretched Toby, ultimately culminating in Flora's delirious finale: a crazed soliloquy full of quotations from earlier parts of the score that ultimately leads to the moment in which she kills the voiceless boy («Speak out or I'll shoot! Answer me! I'll shoot!»).

The Telephone, on the other hand, is a comic opera, a genre that Menotti had

already addressed in 1936 and 1939 with *Amelia al ballo* and *The Old Maid and the Thief*. These three single-act compositions all contributed substantially to Menotti's renown in the field of opera. Structurally they follow in the Italian *opera buffa* tradition, using a series of scenes to describe the misdemeanours of modern society by means of three distinctive female characters. In *Amelia al ballo* this is a rich young woman who is bored and whose sole desire is to take part in an important ball, totally unperturbed by the on-going conflict between husband and lover. In *The Old Maid and the Thief* the main character is a spinster who, having fallen in love with an escaped jailbird thief, gradually changes from being prim and disapproving to committing theft herself. In *The Telephone* once again it's a rich, fashionable woman, who spends all her time on the phone. The plot revolves around the figure of Ben (baritone), whose time is short because he has a train to catch, but who hopes to propose to his beloved Lucy (soprano) before leaving. Alas he is frustrated in this intent because she is constantly on the phone, chatting with her friend Margaret, answering a call from someone who's got the wrong number, ringing to find out the right time, quarrelling on the phone with George, or letting off steam with her friend Pamela. In his desperation Ben feels like cutting the cable, but in the end he decided to leave, and to call Lucy from a phone box. And this is precisely how he finally manages to talk with her and make his marriage proposal.

The phone calls are presented as single items, each enclosed between Ben's recitatives and songs. Each call is an aria featuring Lucy's voice, expressed in different styles that range from the light lyricism of the chat with Margaret (somewhat reminiscent of Stravinsky's *Rake's Progress*) that ends in a burst of laughter portrayed with virtuoso coloratura to the brief but dramatic exchange with George, or the serenely elegiac call with Pamela, with its markedly lyrical developments accompanied by romantic arabesques on the clarinet. It is thus a demanding work for the main singer, since it calls for exuberance, adaptability and a gift for comedy. Ben only comes to the fore in the recitatives that separate Lucy's arias, plus a short a cappella dialogue that precedes the phone call with Pamela, interspersed with his despairing

comments. Only the final call is shaped as a proper "telephone duet", a romantic dialogue in which Lucy accepts the marriage proposal, but tells Ben, in a tonal waltz-like passage, that he must never forget her phone number.

Rather than being a stage property, in this opera the telephone is like a proper character, the true rival of the man in love, a protagonist with a voice of its own expressed by the ringing piano arpeggios and the desperate sounds "like a child calling for help", as the libretto itself declares. As such it is an integral part of the overall musical tapestry, with all its knowing verve, irony and colours.

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Translation by Kate Singleton



Standing from left to right: *Julija Samsonova-Kayet, Roxana Herrera Diaz, Elizabeth Hertzberg, Chiara Isotton, Marily Santoro, Lorenzo Grante*
 Sitting from left to right: *Flavio Emilio Scogna, Raina Kabaivanska and Stefano Monti (stage director)*



Flavio Emilio Scogna

*Special thanks to:
 Mr Aldo Sisillo, Artistic Director, Teatro Comunale Luciano Pavarotti.
 Raina Kabaivanska
 Stefano Monti
 and to the entire theatre staff*