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IN REVIEW

NEW YORK CITY – Amahl and the Night Visitors, Chelsea Opera, 12/10/05

Chelsea Opera assembled a charming, modest production of Menotti's holiday favorite, *Amahl and the Night Visitors* (seen Dec. 10). Such musical, expressive and polished performances deserve greater attention from the community.

Tracy Bidleman beautifully embodied the role of Amahl's Mother and won the audience's trust early on by exchanging a handful of knowing, exasperated glances with the parents in the audience. The weariness in her step matched the wearing away of her moral fiber, but the dignity and security of her voice made a compelling moment of "All that gold!", when she decides to steal from the Kings' gifts to the Christ Child to care for her son. As the crippled Amahl, Nicholas Agar-Johnson, of the Metropolitan Opera Children's Chorus presided like an incontestable storyteller. Though his comic instincts often led him to sing out of the corner of his mouth, which may have been responsible for much aspirated singing, he offered some well-placed high notes, as well.

The three kings formed a noble ensemble worthy of their royal status. C. David Morrow commanded the stage when necessary as Melchior, drawing attention with his placid self-possession. For his big moment, "Oh, woman you can keep the gold," he sang with such stirring, overwhelming power that he seemed to rebuke and absolve the Mother all at once. As Kaspar, Eapen Leubner offered an exuberant, well-rehearsed "This is my box"; he might have integrated more of that coherence and detail into the rest of his portrayal. Albert Barclift filled out the trio as a sturdy, understated King Balthazar. The chorus offered a rousing "Emily, Emily, Michael, Bartholomew," but more effective contrasts between the first and second statements of the repeating introductory theme would have improved an already exciting contribution.

The chamber orchestra under Carmine Aufiero filled St. Peter's Church with beautifully crafted music; special credit goes to concertmistress Kristan Cassady and oboist Slava Znatchenii, who played Amahl's gleaming pipe solos.

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