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CHRISTMAS AND OPERA

'Amahl' provides lifetime of joy for local vocal star

By Michael Johnson

Free Press Editor

BLOOMFIELD - Although his voice is a little shaky now, and he tends to wander from subject to subject, 90-year-old David Aiken can still sing every single word of the Christmas opera 'Amahl and the Night Visitors' just like he did on NBC in the early days of television - which included a performance which brought tears to the eyes of world-famous conductor Arturo Toscanini.

A digitally re-mastered version of Aiken's groundbreaking performance has been recently developed and is available once again for the public to view - just as it was in 1955.

'Amahl and the Night Visitors' is an operatic story of the three wise men and their journey in search of the baby Jesus.

Along their way following the star, they stopped at the home of a shepherd boy named Amahl.

According to Rebecca Paller, who is the associate curator of The Paley Center for Media (formerly the Museum of Television and Radio) in New York, "'Amahl

and the Night Visitors' was not the first opera to be broadcast on network television."

"It was, however, the first opera to be commissioned for television, the first to fully exploit the medium of television and the first to promulgate the notion of opera for television," she said.

According to Aiken, composer Gian Carlo Menotti was paid to create an opera for the fledgling network in the early 1950s and was completely without inspiration.

"He was the kind of artist who needed to be inspired," said Aiken's wife Mary.

Inspiration finally came to Menotti when he viewed the 1550 painting titled 'Adoration of the Magi' by Hieronymous Bosch at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

With that inspiration, Menotti in very short order penned the now-famous 'Amahl and the Night Visitors.'

"What Menotti didn't say was that he had been commissioned to write the work 18 months earlier, and that his procrastination had caused such an eleventh-hour



Staff photo by M. Johnson

Broadway and television opera sensation David Aiken explains the plot to 'Amahl and the Night Visitors.'

AM AHL: Aiken plays King Melchior for half century

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panic that the singers received the final passages of the score just days before the broadcast," said Paller.

Aiken nodded and smiled in agreement at the down-to-the-wire style in which his friend and composer put together 'Amahl.'

The production was a great success, having aired on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day throughout the 1950s and early '60s.

"The next morning - Christmas Day - 'Amahl and the Night Visitors' received an unprecedented front-page review in the New York Times," said Paller. "Even Variety tossed aside its traditional wit and hailed 'Amahl' as a 'singular success that merits annual reprise.'"

"It's probably too simple for these days," said Mary Aiken. "But, we need it today."

She said the simplicity of the story and the beauty of the music would be a welcomed change of pace from today's "sparkles and spangles."

Aiken said that a friend of

Menotti's - Arturo Toscanini - dropped by for one of the dress rehearsals of the opera and with a tear in his eye and a lump in his throat, he simply told Menotti "bella, bella" (Italian for 'beautiful, beautiful').

Although Aiken knew the world-famous conductor was in the audience, he said he didn't feel nervous.

"You think about your part," he said. "You don't think about who's in the audience."

After performing in the opera every year for a decade or so on NBC, Aiken and the cast took the show on the road, touring throughout the country up until the late 20th Century.

Aiken, who was the traveling show's guiding force, still has all of the costumes and props from the production - a treasure trove of classic theater and television history - at his home on Furnace Road.

The actual costume Aiken wore while portraying King Melchior will be on display at the offices of the Bloomfield Free Press beginning Monday

through Christmas.

Although the opera was one of the earliest in television history, Aiken was no stranger to the stage.

He was actually chosen for the role of the king because he had previously performed on Broadway in another Menotti production - 'The Consul.'

It was that relationship which led to his getting one of the lead parts in the television opera.

Did Aiken and his fellow cast-mates - all but one of whom are now deceased - have any idea in the early 1950s that 'Amahl and the Night Visitors' would still be the talk of the music world more than a half-century after it was first performed?

"No," he said. "But we knew it was a smash when we first saw it. We didn't know it would go anywhere, but we all said 'boy

this is wonderful.'"

And, the opera made a pretty good living for Aiken over the years he traveled with the show.

"It paid for our house," said Mary Aiken. "That one opera paid for our house."

Born in Benton, Ill., on Oct. 4, 1917, Aiken calls his ability to sing an 'accident.'

"Singing is an accident - a gift of God," he said. "Your voice is like an instrument - some are worth millions and they look the same as a \$25 violin. It's the sound."

The retired Indiana University vocal performance professor said that in most cases, "you don't make a voice - you are born with a voice, or you aren't."

One of four children, his mother was widowed when he was only four-years-old.

"The day my dad died, my mother had 35 cents and four kids," he said - adoration for his

long-gone mother still present in his voice and eyes. "Mom was proud of me."

And that pride led to his mother scraping up the \$2-per-lesson price it took for vocal instruction for her young son while he was in high school - during the Great Depression.

"And \$2 was a lot of money back then," he said.

He eventually attended Southern Indiana University at Carbondale, Ill., majoring in English because "there was no music major available."

And, to show that he was more than a one-trick pony, Aiken stood out during his school career on the football field, basketball court and especially on the track.

"I was very good in the high hurdles," he said. I never lost a race my senior year."

After college, Aiken enlisted in the military to fight during World War II, where he served as an Army Air Corps bomber pilot - participating in the bombing of Berlin near the end of the war.

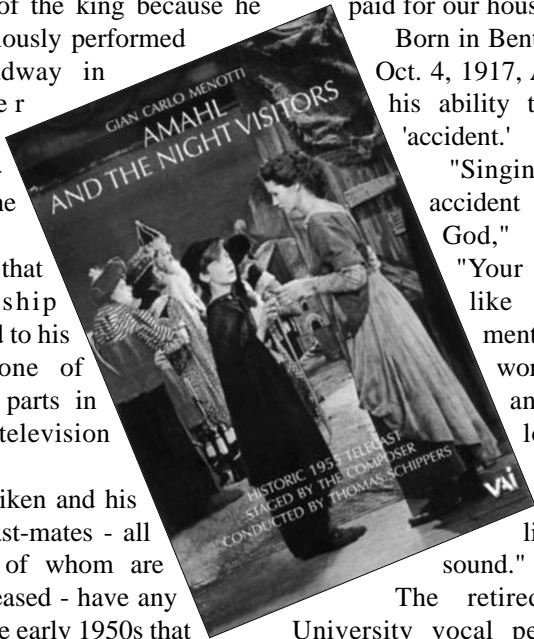
After the war, Aiken enrolled at Indiana University and obtained his Master's Degree in education, "because it was easy," Mary Aiken said.

From there, it was off to New York to seek his fortune on the stage. While teaching school in Connecticut he went on numerous auditions in the Big Apple.

After spending his time among the bright lights of Broadway, he came back to Indiana to teach at the college level, buying the farm he and Mary currently occupy just outside Bloomfield.

Looking back on the half-century-old 'Amahl' production, Aiken now says, "It wasn't the best production I ever did ... but it was my career-builder."

Editor's Note: Beginning Thursday, those with the internet will be able to view the entire 1955 NBC broadcast on their computers by visiting www.bloomfieldfreepress.com. The video will be available through Christmas.



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FRIDAY 12-7 Hamburger & Bun, French Fries, Orange Half, Snickerdoodle Cookie	WEDNESDAY 12-12 Spaghetti & Meat Sauce, Lettuce Salad, Garlic Bread, Peaches
MONDAY 12-10 Chicken Patty Sandwich, Potato Wedges, Pears, Jello	THURSDAY 12-13 Chicken Pot Pie, Carrots & Dip, Potato Chips, Banana Pudding
TUESDAY 12-11 Grilled Cheese Sandwich, Hash Brown Stick, Pickle	FRIDAY 12-14 Pizza, Corn, Apple, Sugar Cookie

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