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INVESTIGATING MRS. NOLAN.

**An exploration of
G. C. Menotti's opera *The Medium*
from a performer's perspective.**

Kerrie Ann Bolton

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to provide an insight into the preparation of a minor role for performance, specifically that of Mrs Nolan from Gian Carlo Menotti's opera *The Medium*, whilst also hoping to demonstrate that small roles both benefit from and are deserving of thorough research.

This study offers contextual information on the composer, with regard to his personal and musical influences, and an outline of the synopsis and background of the opera in question. It also investigates the social, cultural and musical climate in which *The Medium* was written with the intention of deepening understanding of Menotti's compositional style, with specific regard to the musical and dramatic choices he made in order to create the character Mrs Nolan. With a view to understanding how Menotti creates and develops his characters, the score of *The Medium* is explored both musically and textually, with reference to the Russian actor and theatre director Constantin Stanislavski's writings regarding character development and dramatisation, and conductor and author Donald Barra's theories on musical analysis.

In conclusion, the observations and discoveries from this investigation greatly influenced the dramatic choices made in preparations for the performance of the role of Mrs Nolan, whilst also supporting the argument that even minor operatic roles are deserving of and benefit from serious consideration and preparation. As a result of this study, the author was able to create a clear image of Mrs. Nolan's physicality, her vocal tone and colour, as well as create justifications for her intentions, actions and her personal journey throughout this dramatic event. Reviews of the resulting performances of *The Medium* in June 2007 for Lyric Opera Melbourne at Chapel off Chapel Theatre have been included in the Appendix.

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

This is to certify that

- the thesis comprises only original work towards the Master of Music degree
- due acknowledgement has been made in text to all other material referenced
- the thesis is 12,043 words in length as approved by the Graduate School,
Faculty or RHD Committee.

Signed:

A large, stylized handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several loops and a long horizontal stroke.

Kerrie Bolton.

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"Investigating Mrs. Nolan: An exploration of G. C. Menotti's opera *The Medium* from a performer's perspective."

INTRODUCTION

"There are no small parts, only small actors."¹

The minor character, Mrs. Nolan, from Gian Carlo Menotti's opera *The Medium*, could potentially be one of those small, forgettable roles if the performer does not give due consideration to the character's preparation. With no more than two brief appearances, comprising less than twenty short minutes of recitative and ensemble, Mrs. Nolan could quite easily be portrayed as a one dimensional caricature. Like many minor roles, this would be unfortunate both dramatically and musically, since the presence of Mrs. Nolan and her fellow 'customers' are integral to the plot, with Menotti's score being highly expressive, bringing depth and insight to these characters.

Menotti's two act opera *The Medium*, premiered in 1946, spans a dramatic period of about a week, focussing particularly on the events of two evenings. The medium, Madame Flora, holds fraudulent seances in her parlour, for those made desperate and vulnerable by grief. As both the librettist and composer of this opera, Menotti creates an intense journey for this small band of characters utilising an arguably straightforward, realistic libretto and dramatic, verismo score.

This study is an investigation of Menotti's opera *The Medium* for the purpose of preparing myself, the performer, for the role of 'Mrs. Nolan.' Roles in main repertoire operas often offer up an extensive performance history which can be utilised by performers to inform their understanding of the 'motivation' of a character and direct them as they explore a variety of perspectives: textual, musical, dramatic, political, sexual, cultural and so forth. With less mainstream repertoire, however, there is a slimmer history to draw upon with fewer documents to assist performers in any investigation undertaken to aid in the development of their own interpretations of these roles.

¹ Ginger Rogers (1911-1995), American, Academy Award-winning film and stage actress, dancer and singer.

Researching *The Medium* led me in a number of directions and to a variety of sources from which I was able to ground my interpretation. Not only did Menotti's music and libretto reveal skillful characterisations both musically and textually, but I found that exploring his life, the themes within this work, and the historical context of the opera and its setting, helped me to develop a deeper understanding and more intimate relationship with Menotti's Mrs. Nolan.

This study will investigate *The Medium* from historical and biographical perspectives, examining dramatic implications arising from the text and musical score for the purpose of preparing for the role of Mrs. Nolan, an arguably important character despite the relatively small stage time she commands. I began this work with three questions which will be answered across this thesis:

- Who is Mrs. Nolan?
- What and where should I direct my research in order to prepare for this role?
- What is possible in terms of characterisation, dramatic choice and musical interpretation with this role?

Methodology

My approach to investigating the character of Mrs Nolan was somewhat rhizomic, in that I came to the character with no pre-conception about who she was. I worked from previous practice and pursued lines of investigation as they occurred to me beginning with the text, where I looked to find clues into aspects of the character, where I had been trained to look for elements of sub-text coded in the libretto. I then looked for relationships between text and music and how ideas relating to the character and psychological aspects could be revealed in the music. My analysis of the drama and characterisation was loosely based on Constantin Stanislavski's 'method' or 'system'² for building a character, which I coupled with supporting musical analysis, drawing on some of Donald Barra's basic principles of expression.³

A broader study of the biographical accounts of Menotti's life and influences proved to be instrumental in clarifying my understanding, as did the historical context of the opera, thus contributing

² Benedetti, J *Stanislavski and The Actor* (USA: Routledge/Theatre Arts Books, 1998) xiv

³ Barra, D *The Dynamic Performance* (London: Prentice-Hall International, Inc. 1983) 4

to the creation of an accurate picture of the contemporary world in which Menotti's character, Mrs. Nolan resided. Post-World War II American attitudes towards spiritualism, a dominant theme within *The Medium*, were particularly significant. Equally valuable was studying the effect of the economic situation of this period on Menotti's musical and logistic choices, and on the attitudes of the characters he created. This information provided me with a context on which to base my character's overall identity and personality.

Overview of the thesis

Chapter One explores a biographical account of Menotti's life leading up to the writing of *The Medium*. Arguably an insight into Menotti's experiences and influences allows for a deeper understanding of his composition style, subject matter choices, and characterisations. I have therefore included research and information that reflects aspects I regard as significant to informing and developing the role of Mrs. Nolan.

In Chapter Two I provide an overview of Menotti's approach to writing both the libretto and the score, as well as his handling of the recurring themes he chooses to explore in this work. This chapter begins with a synopsis of the opera that should be understood in terms of Menotti's biography outlined in the previous chapter. I also felt this was necessary in order to provide an impression of the contemporary environment and events surrounding Mrs. Nolan.

Chapter Three develops the biographical and dramatic text illuminated in the previous two chapters through further examining the social, cultural, and musical environment of post World War II America, which formed the backdrop against which Menotti composed *The Medium*. In this way, where it is relevant to the characters, storyline and score of the *The Medium*, I hope to discover whether or not it is possible for an operatic score such as this to be considered a valid social document, representative of the attitudes, influences, and values of its time, and whether such scrutiny is beneficial in the process of character development. I also explore how these elements, combined with a specific event in Menotti's life, lead directly to his choice of subject matter for this operatic work.

Some of my lines of inquiry, although interesting, turned out to be either irrelevant or only indirectly relevant to my character study of Mrs. Nolan. In Chapter Four I chose to include some of these lines of

enquiry as although not necessarily directly relevant to my specific study, these findings still helped to broaden my appreciation of the historical and social context within which this opera was written. This information also influenced my general understanding of the characters within the opera, and informed my understanding of their relationships and dramatic choices.

Chapter Five focuses on how this research has helped me in my attempt to construct a believable, three-dimensional character, outlining my choices supported by both musical and dramatic analysis. In my examination of the score, I referred to the theories of Donald Barra, outlined in his book *The Dynamic Performance; A Performer's Guide to Musical Expression and Interpretation*.⁴ My desire to understand the dramatic implications of the text and my need for a system with which to build a character led me to Constantin Stanislavski's teachings about acting, and his opera studio workshops.

⁴ Barra, D *The Dynamic Performance, A Performer's Guide to Musical Expression and Interpretation* (London: Prentice-Hall International, Inc., 1983)

CHAPTER ONE: MENOTTI'S BIOGRAPHY

Seeking an understanding of Menotti's approach to subject matter choices and characterisations to inform my developing sense of the role of Mrs. Nolan, this short chapter outlines the composer's world by sketching his biography.

Gian Carlo Menotti (1911-2007) was both the librettist and composer for his opera, *The Medium*, thus it comes as no surprise that a strong integration between the musical and dramatic structures of this work exists. Seeking an historical perspective on Menotti's social and musical influences seemed integral to developing an appreciation for his choices in storyline, characterisation and compositional approach. This study of Menotti's biography revealed a number of possible sources for many of the themes and attitudes that present themselves in his writing. It also brought to light other potentially relevant lines of investigation, so it seemed only pertinent that I should include his biography.

Menotti was born in Cadegliano, Northern Italy, in July 1911, the sixth of eight children. His father was a prosperous businessman, and his mother, a "talented amateur musician."⁵ He grew up surrounded by creative family and friends, developing a fascination for presenting puppet shows, and along with his siblings, studied the organ, piano, violin and violoncello. His mother, Inés Menotti, was instrumental in his musical upbringing, teaching him the rudiments of music, and organizing regular soirees at their villa.⁶ By the age of thirteen he had written two comic works in the *opera buffa* style, *The Death of Pierrot*, and *The Little Mermaid*. In 1924 the entire family moved to Milan, where his mother enrolled him in the Verdi Conservatory of Music, during which time he regularly attended operatic performances at the Teatro alla Scala.⁷

⁵ Hixon, D.L. *Gian Carlo Menotti, A Bio-Bibliography* (USA: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2000) 1

⁶ Wittke, P. *Gian Carlo Menotti: Renaissance Man Of The Theatre* (<<http://www.schirmer.com>> 1991) part 1

⁷ Hixon, D.L. *Gian Carlo Menotti, A Bio- Bibliography* (USA: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2000) 2

In his book *Gian Carlo Menotti. A Bio-Bibliography* Donald Hixon states that as a child Menotti was “... fascinated by the strange and unusual, the theatrical, the mystical, and the depraved and warped, a preoccupation that would prove portentous to much of his later music.”⁸ According to Hixon, this fascination may have been the result of a ‘certain lunacy’ that was evident in the Menotti family history. One of these apparently eccentric relatives, who influenced a youthful Menotti's curiosity about madness and the marginalised, was Liline Bianchini. She was responsible for teaching him to play the organ, and was said to experience ‘religious hallucinations.’⁹ Religion and faith, a recurring theme that he explored in his adult work, also featured strongly throughout Menotti’s childhood. Certain religious influence may have come from one of his uncles who underwent training to become a Roman Catholic priest, but it was likely that “the religious ardour of a somewhat eccentric parish priest by the name of Don Rimoldi”¹⁰ also greatly influenced Menotti’s childhood experience of faith. Menotti once said of his personal relationship with spirituality that:

the intense and incandescent faith which nourished my childhood and my adolescence has seared my soul forever. I’ve lost my faith, but it’s a loss that has left me uneasy. I often feel like a runaway who suddenly finds himself wondering if he has not left home too rashly or too soon.¹¹

At the age of 17, not long after his father, Alfonso's death, Menotti’s mother took him to America to attend the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. With an introduction letter from a personal friend of the family, Arturo Toscanini’s wife, she also managed to arrange composition lessons for him with Rosario Scalero, an eminent professor at Curtis and head of the composition department there. It was here, from 1927 to 1933, that Menotti undertook intensive study of “great works of the past”¹² and in particular, sixteenth century counterpoint. Whilst studying at the Curtis Institute of Music, Menotti met fellow student Samuel Barber. He too was studying composition with Scalero. Barber and Menotti collaborated on numerous musical projects, including two of Barber’s operas, *A Hand of Bridge* and

⁸ *ibid*, 2

⁹ Hixon, D.L *Gian Carlo Menotti, A Bio-Bibliography* (USA: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 2000) 1

¹⁰ *ibid*, 1-2

¹¹ Jay, C. L., *A production of Gian Carlo Menotti’s opera “The Medium”* (D.M.A., University of Maryland College Park, 1997) 310

¹² Hixon, D.L *Gian Carlo Menotti, A Bio-Bibliography* (USA: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 2000) 2

Vanessa, for which Menotti wrote the libretti. After they had both graduated, they purchased a home together in Mount Kisco, New York and for the next four decades remained partners in both life and work, until Barber's death in 1981.

It was at the Curtis Institute that Menotti began writing his first mature opera, *Amelia Goes to the Ball*. This successful *opera buffa* was first performed in 1937, and then again in 1938 at the Metropolitan Opera.¹³ His next operatic work, *The Old Maid and the Thief*, was another comic piece. Commissioned and produced by the N.B.C. specifically to be performed on the radio, it was first aired in 1939. The work's next performance was on stage almost two years later, produced by the Philadelphia Opera Company. Premiered by the Metropolitan Opera New York in 1942, Menotti's third opera, *The Island God*, was far more dramatic than his previous operatic works, but unfortunately much less successful. This tragic one act opera proved to be:

one of the worst flops in the history of the Metropolitan Opera...since faulty staging contributed to this dismal failure, Menotti... withdrew the opera ...[deciding] that thereafter he would insist on directing his operas himself.¹⁴

For the next three or four years, Menotti did not appear to be engaged in any operatic writing, but instead focussed his attention on composing a number of ballet scores, some instrumental music, and his *Piano Concerto in A Minor* (1945). By the time Menotti returned to opera and began writing *The Medium* (1946), commissioned by Columbia University with the help of the Alice M. Ditson Fund, his compositional style had matured. Menotti once stated that writing *The Medium* was key in his development as an operatic composer. He felt that it was with this work that he:

discovered what [he] could do in the lyric theatre ... being able to unfold a story in a lyrical way; and by that [he meant] to make the *recitative* – the part that tells the story – part of the lyric whole. Only Puccini [he felt] solved that problem ... never to interrupt the lyrical flow and to indicate action at the same time.¹⁵

¹³ Dizikes, J *Opera in America. A Cultural History* (London: Yale University Press, 1993) 539

¹⁴ Hixon, D.L *Gian Carlo Menotti, A Bio-Bibliography* (USA: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2000) 4

¹⁵ Chotzinoff, S *A Little Night Music* (London: Hamish and Hamilton Ltd, 1964) 71

As Donald Hixon observes, “A decade in Menotti’s creative life separates *Amelia* from *The Medium*, and yet, it was a crucial period of growth. He moved from the charming, if sometimes a little superficial *opera buffa* to a more probing form of music drama that is as individual as *Amelia* is derivative.”¹⁶ *The Medium* is a work that requires a deep understanding of the themes explored in this thesis.

¹⁶ Hixon, D.L. *Gian Carlo Menotti, A Bio-Bibliography* (USA: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2000) 4

CHAPTER TWO: *THE MEDIUM*, SYNOPSIS AND CREATIVE APPROACH

In order to realise a plausible context within which Mrs. Nolan might be expected to exist, and as part of the preliminary stages of researching and developing her character and her contemporary physical environment, I felt that it was necessary to gain a more thorough appreciation of the opera's story line, libretto and music. In addition to this, I also believed that an understanding of Mrs. Nolan's fellow characters, with which she so closely interacts, would also be of enormous benefit to my study. I have therefore included a sketch of the synopsis of *The Medium*, in order to provide a frame of reference for my research and analysis.

Synopsis

Act one of *The Medium* opens in the squalid parlour of the 'medium' Madame Flora, also known as 'Baba' by her family and friends. The room is complete with a round table, a small puppet theatre, a large white curtain and other paraphernalia required to successfully stage a séance. Monica (her daughter) and Toby (her mute servant boy) are happily playing together instead of preparing the room for Baba's next séance. She enters and scolds them angrily, threatening to strike Toby. Hurriedly they set up the strings, pulleys and other devices employed for the deception. They then swiftly take up their various posts just in time for the customers to arrive. Mr. and Mrs. Gobineau enter first followed by a newcomer, Mrs. Nolan. The Gobineaus have been attending these séances weekly for almost two years in order to communicate with Mickey, their baby son who drowned on his second birthday. The uncertain Mrs. Nolan nervously hopes to make contact with Doodly, her sixteen-year-old daughter who passed away the year before. After polite introductions and some brief but emotionally raw conversation, the séance finally begins.

Madame Flora appears to fall into a trance. The powerful combination of Baba's mesmerising, terrifying behaviour and Toby's eerie lighting display, creates an atmosphere in which Monica is able to convince the clients that she is both the apparition of Doodly, and that her laughter is the disembodied voice of Mickey. The deception seems to be unfolding smoothly, when suddenly an

hysterical Baba leaps out of her chair and cries out in horror, “Who touched me?”¹⁷ In a frenzied state she claims she’s not feeling well and orders the bewildered clients to get out. They reluctantly leave, unable to comprehend why Madame Flora would “be afraid of [their] dead.”¹⁸

Left alone with Monica and Toby, the terrified and confused Baba convinces herself that the 'cold, cold hand' that had encircled her throat “wasn’t the hand of a man”¹⁹ but was that of something she had conjured from the spirit world. In an attempt to find a more rational explanation, she then rages at Toby, yelling, “He’s the one!”²⁰ She angrily accuses him of trying to frighten her. Monica attempts to calm her by singing the haunting gypsy song *O black swan*. Although neither Monica nor Toby confesses to hearing anything unusual, Baba insists that she can hear unexplained, unearthly voices and begins to pray.

Act two opens onto a scene in Madame Flora’s apartment, a few days after her breakdown in act one. It is evening, and Monica and Toby are playing alone again. A carefree waltz begins to develop into a beautiful but awkward love song between them, sung by Monica. The sudden entrance of Baba, however, rudely interrupts the tender moment. Monica disappears as Baba corners Toby and tries to extract a confession from him for the strange events of the other night, first with calculated kindness and then with threats of violence. When he doesn’t respond, she explodes with rage and whips him repeatedly. Monica rushes in and stops the beating only moments before Baba’s clients enter for their scheduled séance.

The Gobineaus and Mrs. Nolan are shocked to discover that Baba has not only cancelled all future séances, but is admitting that she is "nothing but a fraud."²¹ She insists that she has been 'cheating' them, but they refuse to believe her. None of them are prepared to give up “the only joy [they] have in [their] lives”²² since their children have died. In exasperation, Baba yells at her clients to leave, calling them all fools. Once they have all departed, Baba orders Toby to leave for good and locks Monica in

¹⁷ Menotti, G C *The Medium, Piano/Vocal Score* (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1997) 38

¹⁸ *ibid*, 42

¹⁹ *ibid*, 45

²⁰ *ibid*, 46

²¹ Menotti, G C *The Medium, Piano/Vocal Score* (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1997) 89

²² *ibid*, 96

her bedroom. Confused, paranoid, afraid and still hearing unearthly voices, an exhausted Baba drinks herself to sleep. Toby returns quietly for his belongings and to see Monica, but accidentally disturbs Baba. She wakes up, and in her terror, grabs a revolver and begins shooting in the direction of the noise she heard. Baba cries out triumphantly that she has killed the ghost. As Monica pounds on her bedroom door, Toby's dead body falls out from his hiding place. Baba unlocks the door and Monica realizing what has happened, runs screaming for help. Bending over Toby's dead body, Baba whispers "Was it you? Was it you?" moments before the music crashes to an end and the final curtain falls.

Menotti's creative approach

As Menotti created both the score and the libretto for *The Medium*, it is clear that he had very definite ideas regarding the portrayal of his characters dramatically and musically, with equal emphasis on both these elements. As P.H. Lang so eloquently proposed in *The Experience of Opera*,

"Music alone cannot create *dramatis personae*; to do so it must ally itself with words. Without them, the music of an opera, no matter how beautiful, remains a thought without a body."²³

In Menotti's *The Medium*, the given timeframe within which the storyline and characters are able to evolve is limited, since its running time is only 50 minutes.²⁴ Menotti overcame this potential limitation by creating a straightforward text and dramatic, descriptive score. He therefore ensures that the plot efficiently and coherently accelerates towards its ghastly climax through a tightly woven union between music and text.

The music

"Music in a good opera provides something that at once precedes and surpasses the concrete concept of the drama, for music dissolves feelings into melodies and harmonies, rhythms and counterpoints ... the painting of a character in the spoken drama requires time; in opera it is almost instantaneous."²⁵

According to Reinhard G. Pauly in his book *Music and the Theatre, An Introduction to Opera*:

²³ Lang, P H *The Experience of Opera* (New York: W W Norton & Company, Inc., 1971) 15

²⁴ Harewood *The New Kobbe's Opera Book* (London: Ebury Press, 1997) 456

²⁵ Lang, P H *The Experience of Opera* (New York: W W Norton & Company, Inc., 1971) 16

In Menotti's view opera, like most modern drama, should essentially be a 'dialogue of action'. Recitative of many descriptions, rather than a succession of arias, therefore is at the opera's core. He changes freely between aria and arioso, regular spoken dialogue, melodrama, and recitative. The latter may be completely unaccompanied, barely accompanied, or harmonically and rhythmically more clearly defined.²⁶

The composition comprises a great diversity of eclectic styles, drawing on historical devices such as the easily identifiable and "unforgettable melodies"²⁷ within the opera, "...including the folk-like *O, Black Swan* sung by Monica ... reflect the flexible diatonic style [of Puccini, combined] with a rich and free harmonic style...closely interwoven with dramatic conceptions."²⁸ Further, when considering his dramatic influences, it has also been observed:

"The Puccini-ism of Menotti is not merely musical: Menotti thinks ... in terms of function, space, dramatic incident, and structure in exactly the way that Puccini did, even when the two composers' subjects are mostly divergent. Menotti's theatre is not always "realistic", but it is certainly contemporary in its subject matter and its concerns; his particular musical talent enables him to create orchestral and vocal parts which do not hinder, and sometimes heighten the dramatic context."²⁹

This tendency towards a more verismo or 'truthful' approach to subject-matter, is evident in his contemporary setting of *The Medium*.

The text

Although Menotti's literary achievements were usually praised for demonstrating an "acute sense of theatre and ...[atmosphere],"³⁰ he also occasionally received harsh criticism. His works have been referred to as 'soap operas' with librettos that "yield too strongly the derivation of cheap women's fiction for some tastes."³¹ Menotti's style of writing flows between forms from "colloquial...during scenes of conflict and rapid exchange of dialogue, [to] poetic during moments of lyric reflection."³²

²⁶ Pauly, R.G. *Music and Theatre. An Introduction to Opera* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1967) 393

²⁷ Salzman, E. *Twentieth-Century Music: An Introduction* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1967) 102

²⁸ *ibid*, 102

²⁹ Salzman, E *Twentieth-Century Music: An Introduction* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1967) 103

³⁰ Drummond, A *American Opera Librettos* (New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1973) 710

³¹ Mordden, E *Opera In The Twentieth Century. Sacred, Profane, Godot* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) 309

³² Drummond, A *American Opera Librettos* (New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1973) 66

With audience appeal and effective communication being important considerations, he skilfully manages to work both “common English conversation and prose into opera.”³³

The score of *The Medium* is saturated with themes that are universal, as well as others more pertinent to a mid-twentieth century American audience. Menotti’s libretto explores or comment on, amongst other things, attitudes toward servitude, class, racism, deceit, greed, materialism, disability, love, sexuality, loss, death, murder, madness, delusion, scepticism, religion, spiritualism, mesmerism, and the spiritual mores of the day. These ‘themes of social concern’³⁴ imbued in his opera, reveal an “attempt to provide a more honest reflection of twentieth century America and less a panoramic view of American history ... [showing] how life is being lived at the present time ... [discarding] romantic historical subjects of the nineteenth century operatic tradition.”³⁵ He views his characters as “symbols of contemporary society”³⁶ rather than simply pure verismo.

The Medium also presents the audience with psychological and social problems, and “dramatic situations that [most] modern audiences could identify with.”³⁷ Menotti’s emphasis is on the “psychological exploration [of his characters] as opposed to a more episodic treatment or emphasis on plot.”³⁸ The setting never moves from Madame Flora’s apartment, and although the timeline spans less than a week, the action predominantly centres on two of her séances. All the tension and drama that drives this work is fuelled by the juxtaposition of the various characters’ relationships, and their unique psychological journeys, but these are not concerns of the libretto alone and are deftly exposed through the insightful text and orchestration.

³³ Grieb, L *The Operas of Gian Carlo Menotti. 1937-1972: A Selective Bibliography* (New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1974) 123

³⁴ *ibid*, 145

³⁵ Drummond, A *American Opera Librettos* (New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1973) 145

³⁶ Grieb, L *The Operas of Gian Carlo Menotti, 1937-1972: A Selective Bibliography* (New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1974) 122

³⁷ Grout, D.J *A History of Western Music, Fifth Edition* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1996) 799

³⁸ Drummond, A *American Opera Librettos* (New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1973) 144

Music and words combined

To explore the interplay of the music and libretto, consider Madame Flora, the fraudulent medium, and how she is a carefully developed psychological study that unfolds through both the textual and musical language employed. Her musical themes and accompaniments are “markedly different [to the other characters ... with a] more declamatory and jagged”³⁹ style. In stark contrast to this, a more undulating, lyrical melodic line musically portrays Monica, her daughter. This musical juxtaposition of the two characters helps build the exciting dramatic tension between them, and is a musical device Menotti employs throughout the work. The music “makes a counterpoint between Flora’s anguish and the idyllic world of Monica,”⁴⁰ In the libretto, Madame Flora’s menacing suspicion and fear provides a strong contrast to the “simple, honest affection displayed between Monica and Toby,”⁴¹ their mute servant. Madame Flora’s growing paranoia drives her to confuse reality with her imagination and the spirit world, and she is ultimately undone by her own deception when she murders the most innocent, voiceless character of them all, the orphaned gypsy, Toby. Menotti himself explained:

“Despite its eerie setting and gruesome conclusions, *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. Baba, the Medium, has no scruples in cheating her clients... until something happens which she herself has not prepared. This insignificant incident... shatters her self-assurance, and drives her almost insane with rage.”⁴²

³⁹ Grieb, L *The Operas of Gian Carlo Menotti, 1937-1972: A Selective Bibliography* (New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1974) 123

⁴⁰ Grieb, L *The Operas of Gian Carlo Menotti, 1937-1972* (New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1974) 94

⁴¹ Drummond, A *American Opera Librettos* (New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1973) 66

⁴² Harewood, The Earl of, *The New Kobbe’s Opera Book* (London: Ebury Press, 1997) 456

CHAPTER THREE: CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

It has been said that, “No art form reflects the moods, dreams, and passions of its people quite as powerfully as opera.”⁴³ This chapter explores the social and cultural concerns of the time at which the opera was created, including Menotti’s own experiences and how they impacted his work. Of course, this approach is contingent on proposing that an operatic score can be regarded as a social document. It also explores how the choices, influences and musical tastes of a composer might be a valid reflection of the social climate in which the score is conceived. It looks to uncover in what way might these collections of notes, words and ideas provide an insight into issues such as the values, tastes, and creative influences of the day. The approach adopted is that thorough knowledge and appreciation of the operatic score, societal and musical influences can help a performer realize a more intimate portrayal of a character for performance.

When asked how he approached composing, Menotti replied,

“The trouble with me is that ... I play a dual role. I am the composer. But I am also the audience, and I want to be sure that I as the audience understand clearly what the composer intended. You can compare it with having bad breath. Everybody knows it but the fellow who has it. It is an effort to be on both sides – to breathe and smell your own breath!”⁴⁴

With this keen sense of responsibility for the reception of his creative works, Menotti seems to have been a composer with social awareness and conscience. It could be argued that all composers care about their audience, however in *A History of Western Music* D.J. Grout proposes, “in the last quarter of the twentieth century more and more composers have addressed their work to the public rather than to other composers, connoisseurs, and analysts.”⁴⁵

The audience for ‘serious’ art music is a limited fraction of the population and the audience for new and experimental music is even smaller. As it did in Europe, American “traditional opera ... re-

⁴³ Kirk, E *American Opera* (USA: University of Illinois Press, 2001) 11

⁴⁴ Chotzinoff, S *A Little Nightmusic* (London: Hamish Hamilton Ltd., 1964) 66-7

⁴⁵ Grout, D.J *A History of Western Music, Fifth Edition* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1996) 803

established itself with surprising speed at the end of World War II ... in spite of overwhelming ... handicaps."⁴⁶ In America, however, there were far less "permanent operatic establishments...playing in their own houses."⁴⁷ This meant that although contemporary American opera was also being encouraged and staged in American opera houses throughout the early twentieth century, both the potential for audience attendance, and budgetary issues required extremely serious consideration. Not only does a new work usually incur high production costs, due to extra rehearsal time, new sets and costumes, but also there is no guarantee that it will draw a substantial audience. "Even with full houses opera is expensive to produce."⁴⁸

Menotti himself attempted to increase his work's viability and accessibility by giving careful consideration to the logistics of the production and also by anticipating the size of both his audience and the companies likely to stage a performance. *The Medium* was conceived for a small theatre, and the orchestration called for only fourteen musicians. Although Menotti's work has made it into larger houses, he is not alone in relying on the smaller opera companies for the opportunities of initially having his work staged. *The Medium*, however, experienced great success when performed in a Broadway theatre, New York. It enjoyed an extended eight-month run⁴⁹, and was extremely successful to the point of being considered a 'hit.'⁵⁰ Through works like *The Medium*, Menotti was instrumental in blurring the lines between 'high art opera' and music theatre.

In order to expand his audience base, Menotti joined the small but growing number of artists exploring the possibilities and limitations of presenting their work through the electronic medium of television and film. Menotti produced a film version of *The Medium* that was shown on television in 1948. This attempt was not entirely successful since the story's "static quality and brevity"⁵¹ did not appear to

⁴⁶ Pauly, R.G *Music and the Theatre, An Introduction to Opera* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970) 416

⁴⁷ *ibid*, 423

⁴⁸ Pauly, R.G *Music and the Theatre, An Introduction to Opera* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970) 424

⁴⁹ Dizikes, J *Opera in America, A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) 540

⁵⁰ Blom, E *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Fifth Edition, Vol 5 L-M* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1976) 711

⁵¹ Grieb, L *The Operas of Gian Carlo Menotti, 1937-1972: A Selective Bibliography* (New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, 1974) 89

translate smoothly to film. Outdoor scenes were added, but “Rome’s sunshine”⁵² did not evoke the claustrophobic, dingy horror that was so easily created in the enclosed environment of the theatre setting. “The macabre [was] lost in the film.”⁵³

As the title of Menotti’s opera suggests, *The Medium* embraces themes such as spirituality and spiritualism, faith and fraud, deception and dilusion. Throughout this opera Menotti explores “the effectiveness of faith, or lack thereof, in the area of the occult or supernatural.”⁵⁴ Both acts of this fifty-minute opera are set in a medium’s home, somewhere in America, in the early to mid 1900s. These themes, and the character’s attitudes towards them, are pivotal to the storyline. This chapter, therefore includes an historical perspective of the evolution of spiritualism in American society, as well as Menotti’s attitudes towards this supernatural movement.

Spiritualism is a movement that was given religious status, and is said to have originated in America in the late 1840s. Those that believe in Spiritualism are convinced that there are certain people who are gifted with an ability to communicate with the spirits of the deceased. These people are called *mediums*, and it is through them that these spirits are supposedly able to perform feats that include speaking, writing, moving objects, and in some cases, materializing.

Two young sisters, Margaret and Catherine Fox of Hydesville, New York State, are credited with being responsible for the creation of the Spiritualism movement and the accompanying spectacle known as the *séance*. Apparently beginning as a prank, the two younger sisters tied a piece of string to a suspended apple, and pulled on it in order to create a ‘rapping’ sound to confuse their mother. Their mother mentioned the strange noises to friends and eventually the girls were questioned about it. As the story goes, they lied to avoid punishment, by saying that it must be a ghost in their home making the sounds. The story began to spread, and with the help of their older sister Leah, the siblings apparently developed ‘special effects’ and invited groups of people to witness their little charade, which they called a *séance*. Their ‘act’ caught on, and after a couple of years, and much publicity, the phenomenon

⁵² *ibid*, 89

⁵³ *ibid*, 89

⁵⁴ Hixon, D.L *Gian Carlo Menotti, A Bio-Bibliography* (USA: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 2000) 5

of the séance had spread throughout America and into Europe. In later life the two younger sisters publicly confessed that Spiritualism “was a fraud and an evil,”⁵⁵ and, as a consequence, the image of the movement was badly damaged. Interest in Spiritualism continued to decline until it experienced a slight resurgence in popularity during World War I. Séances offered what many believed traditional churches and spirituality could not, which was a direct line of communication to dead loved ones, providing bereaving families with a sense of hope and comfort. A similar resurgence occurred around the time of World War II, but to a lesser degree.

Menotti’s interest in séances was fuelled by personal experience. His original inspiration for the plot of this opera was based on an event in his personal life in 1936. While staying in the Austrian town of St. Wolfgang near Salzburg, Menotti and Barber were frequently invited to dinner by a local couple⁵⁶. The lady of the house would apparently excuse herself following each meal, disappearing into their private chapel to pray. One evening the guests were invited to accompany her only to discover that the woman was holding séances hoping to communicate with her dead teenage daughter. Menotti was initially sceptical about the entire proceedings, but was particularly surprised by the “way his friends were pathetically anxious to believe that the spirit of their dead daughter was talking to them...”⁵⁷. Apparently deeply moved by this event, Menotti later admitted in an interview that,

“It was I, not she, who felt cheated. The creative power of her faith and conviction made me examine my own cynicism and led me to wonder at the multiple texture of reality. It also made me wonder whether belief was a creative power and whether scepticism could destroy creative powers. Anyway, the episode was the beginning of *The Medium*.”⁵⁸

In act two Menotti has Madame Flora admit to her bewildered clients that “...[I am] nothing but a fraud, I can prove it to you.”⁵⁹ Even though she exposes her deception, and tries to reveal all her tricks to the Gobineaus and Mrs. Nolan, in their desperation they still blindly choose to believe that the

⁵⁵ Haslam, G 2005-07 *Anomalies, Spiritualism* <<http://anomalyinfo.com>>

⁵⁶ Fryer, J.A. *A Guide to the Study and Performance of Three Operas of Gian-Carlo Menotti* (Columbia University Teachers College, 1974) 21

⁵⁷ Harewood, The Earl of, *The New Kobbe’s Opera Book* (London: Ebury Press, 1997) 456

⁵⁸ Jay, C. L., A production of Gian Carlo Menotti’s opera “The Medium” (D.M.A., University of Maryland College Park, 1997) 8

⁵⁹ Menotti, G.C *The Medium, Piano/Vocal Score* (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1997) 89

séances are legitimate. An insistent Mr. Gobineau even suggests to Baba “It might well be you thought you were cheating all the while, but you were not, you were not.”⁶⁰

By the time Menotti was writing his two-act opera, *The Medium*, twentieth century American opera composition comprised a great diversity of eclectic styles, which “both reflected and defined its people.”⁶¹ Alongside traditional and contemporary European influences, American art music was also being influenced by the “traditions of its colonial and indigenous past and ...[its] multicultural ethnic mix.”⁶²

These wide-ranging influences were not peculiar to Menotti. American contemporaries of his, including his partner Samuel Barber (1910-1981) and Ned Rorem (b. 1923), often appeared to share similar intentions or goals. Although their compositional styles are vastly different, they approached tonality with far more conservatism than many of their more avant-garde twentieth century counterparts. Even though Menotti’s music is not representative of these more experimental movements, he displayed a definite ‘understanding and sympathy’⁶³ for their ideals and techniques. Menotti was once quoted as saying that “contemporary subjects are important. The artist must find the poetry in contemporary life.”⁶⁴ It is this thirst to represent contemporary life that helps build an approach to the character of Mrs Nolan, despite the brevity of her appearances in the opera.

⁶⁰ Menotti, G. C *The Medium*, Piano/Vocal Score (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1997) 94

⁶¹ Kirk, E.K *American Opera* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001) 2

⁶² Grout, D.J *A History of Western Music, Fifth Edition* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1996) 759

⁶³ Chotzinoff, S *A Little Night Music* (London: Hamish and Hamilton, 1964) 61

⁶⁴ Chotzinoff, S *A Little Night Music* (London: Hamish Hamilton Ltd, 1964) 72

CHAPTER FOUR: LINES OF ENQUIRY

Several lines of enquiry were pursued when undertaking this study, several of which did not prove to be borne out by research evidence, but nonetheless these pursuits offered insights that were key to my broader understanding of Menotti and his work. I detail two themes that were explored to show the full extent of my investigative approach.

Homosexuality and acceptance?

In analysing the libretto and story line of *The Medium*, and considering its potential for subtext, I wondered if perhaps the relationship between Madame Flora and Toby, her servant, could possibly be autobiographical in nature. Was Madame Flora a realization of Menotti's own mother, depicting her as a domineering, intolerant matriarch, abusing and abandoning her neglected 'voiceless' son? Did Toby, the mute, gypsy orphan, represent Menotti himself?

I began searching for evidence that might suggest that Menotti's mother could not accept, or was in denial of her son's homosexuality, or if she had indeed rejected him because of it. However, I found no literature at all to support this hypothesis. In fact I found quite the opposite. Menotti appears to have been very candid about his relationship with Barber.

According to Donald L. Hixon in *Gian Carlo Menotti: A Bio-bibliography* "When approached on the subject of homosexuality, Menotti has said, "My life is an open book; however, I don't like to leave it around."⁶⁵ Also, all the available biographical material I sourced appeared to unanimously portray Ines Menotti as an accepting, supportive and loving mother, who was instrumental in both Menotti and his sibling's musical education.

Years later, Menotti wrote a two act play, *The Leper*, actually addressing the subject matter of homosexuality, and in it made a plea for tolerance toward minority groups and outsiders. It was seen as "a serious study about the need for a minority to find the way to live within the limitations of the

⁶⁵ Hixon, D.L *Gian Carlo Menotti, A Bio-Bibliography*, (USA: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 2000) 10

majority."⁶⁶ His play, was commissioned by Marie Bell, and premiered in 1970 at the Florida State University's Fine Arts Festival, but remains unpublished. Menotti said of his play, "The symbol I take for man outside society is homosexuality. But it could be applied to all kinds of 'lepers'."⁶⁷

Fascism?

Given the cultural background and political environment in Italy at the time *The Medium* was conceived, I believed that it was also necessary to investigate the extent to which fascist elements may have been present in the work, particularly in terms of the character's attributes and motivations. Perhaps Menotti, who had retained his Italian citizenship in spite of spending most of his adult life living abroad, had strong political opinions about this totalitarian political party governing Italy, his homeland, for twenty-one years, from 1922 to 1943.

I found no obvious references to fascist politics in the text of *The Medium*, nor did I find any literature supporting my suspicions. However, on closer examination of certain character's behaviour in the text of the opera, it appeared that I could argue a case for some of their actions and intentions indeed reflecting a particular political frame of reference. The mute servant Toby, for instance, could possibly represent the voiceless citizens of Italy who felt disadvantaged and powerless under the fascist regime. Baba appears to have complete control over her household and her clients, much like the Italian Fascist leader, Benito Mussolini had over the Italian people. Ruling predominantly through fear, Baba embodies many of the characteristics of this brutal, dictatorial regime. Like Mussolini, Baba demanded loyalty, and imposed a complete state-like control over the people in her life in many ways including socially and economically. Her journey too, appears to be one of eventual self destruction after a long period of power. She changes from a strong, cunning, deceitful and controlling person, into a crazed murderer, as she allows her imagination, distrust, and superstition to consume her. However, unlike the demise of fascism in Italy, even as the final curtain falls, we are led to believe that everyone still obeys her and fears her.

⁶⁶ Wittke, P. *Gian Carlo Menotti: Renaissance Man Of The Theatre*, (<<http://www.schirmer.com>> 1991) part v

⁶⁷ Hixon, D.L *Gian Carlo Menotti, A Bio-Bibliography*, (USA: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 2000) 181

I don't believe that Baba's descent into paranoia and madness is reflective of the demise of Mussolini's rule, nor does it offer a more satisfying, fictional alternate resolution. Apart from the customers standing as a united front against Baba, firm in their belief in her mystic abilities, Menotti gives us no political coup, no underground resistance movement, nor does it appear likely that Baba would have ever entertained any noble intentions or aspirations for the good of her community, akin to the initial goals and ideologies of the fascist party.

In contrast to *The Medium*, Menotti's later opera, *The Consul*, is a far more political piece, although on the surface it appears to be more specifically a 'Kafkaesque' (*The Trial*)⁶⁸ comment on the frustration of bureaucratic red tape. *The Consul*, first performed in 1950, is a tale of political refugees in an unspecified European city, pitted against an unresponsive bureaucracy. According to George Martin in *The Companion to Twentieth-Century Opera*:

"The story concerns the destruction of a family unable to emigrate to escape persecution. Its enemy is twofold: its own repressive government and that of the neighboring "free" society that will not practice the humanity it preaches. In the years before and after World War II, when refugees were fleeing fascist and later communist governments, the twofold problem was much in people's minds. Typically the "free" societies rescued the ... distinguished or ... useful but doomed the ordinary by entangling them at the consulate or border in red tape."⁶⁹

In *The Consul*, Menotti has created a piece of theatre that is a protest against man's inhumanity to men, and an indictment against totalitarian dictators and political parties much like the Italian fascist regime.⁷⁰ This opera, in comparison to *The Medium*, makes a far more political statement in its "outcry against political nationalism ... [and also its] plea for humaneness and compassion."⁷¹

Therefore, when compared to *The Consul*, it appears unlikely that it was Menotti's intention for *The Medium* to be perceived as a political work, otherwise it could be argued that *The Medium*'s plot is only a flawed and superficial study of the historic events, offering little insight, or purpose. Apart from the fact that the tyrant, Baba, is undone by her own hand, as her life and sanity seem to implode, the

⁶⁸ Kafka, F. *The Trial*, (London: Picador, 1977) 7

⁶⁹ Martin, G *The Companion to Twentieth-Century Opera* (Great Britain: University Press, 1989) 457

⁷⁰ Pauly, R.G. *Music and the Theatre, An Introduction*, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1970) 389

⁷¹ *ibid*, 389

people around her still remain subserviant to her. Although some of the characters' personalities and behaviours are reminiscent of events and people involved in the Italian fascist regime of the early 1940's, I finally came to the conclusion that it was not Menotti's intention to create an obviously political piece of theatre in *The Medium*.

Although these lines of enquiry did not appear to directly inform my understanding of the characterisation of Mrs. Nolan, they definitely served to deepen my appreciation and understanding of the composer and the work as a whole.

CHAPTER FIVE: MUSICAL AND DRAMATIC CHOICES FOR MRS NOLAN

In searching for a dramatic model on which to base my characterisation, I revisited the teachings of the Russian born Constantin Stanislavski (1863-1938). Stanislavski is often said to be "the most significant and most frequently quoted figure in the history of actor training."⁷² His love of opera was also widely known and as well as being a co-founder of the Moscow Art Theatre along with Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, Stanislavski was also responsible for establishing the Moscow Opera Studio, a school for aspiring opera singers. His system of acting, or 'method' as it is also known, is arguably the most influential acting system on the modern stage and screen. He was a practitioner of the naturalistic school of thought, encouraging actors and singers alike to achieve realistic performances through, amongst other methods, developing an emotional connection to their characters. It was at the Opera Studio that he endeavoured to mould his students "into a synthesis of singer-actor-musician."⁷³ In her text outlining Constantin Stanislavski's method of character development, *Stanislavski and The Actor*, Jean Benedetti states:

the basis for every role and for the performance as a whole is a detailed understanding of the action of the play, the dramatic situation... [and] the historical and social background.⁷⁴

Having some knowledge of Menotti's life, his influences and the period in which *The Medium* was set, gave me a context for the various characters' attitudes and behaviours. As a group, Baba's customers reflect the types of attitudes that make ordinary people like themselves such easy prey for a fraudulent spiritualist like her. Their loneliness and vulnerability allowed Baba to be extremely successful in her deception. Throughout the opera, the Gobineaus display both denial and blind faith, in contrast to Mrs. Nolan who, in act one, at first seems reluctant and unsure about the entire proceedings. Mr. and Mrs. Gobineau appear so desperate for reassurance and comfort that they seemed prepared to place their trust in anyone who might offer them some solace, perhaps like Menotti's friends at his first encounter with a séance.

⁷² Benedetti, J *Stanislavski and The Actor* (New York: Routledge/Theatre Arts Books, 1998) vii

⁷³ Stanislavski, C *Stanislavski on Opera* (New York: Routledge, 1998) viii

⁷⁴ Benedetti, J *Stanislavski and The Actor* (USA: Routledge/Theatre Arts Books, 1998) 104

In act one we see in Mrs. Nolan a woman whose initial uncertainty could be dramatically justified in a number of ways. Knowing something of Menotti's personal experience with séances, it would be feasible to assert that Mrs. Nolan is a representation of Menotti's own attitudes toward spiritualism. Her hesitation could potentially be seen as a timid scepticism in the validity of the practice of spiritualism and its rituals. Alternatively, Mrs. Nolan's early reluctance could be perceived to be the result of a spiritual crisis arising from a clash in ideologies between a strong conviction in spiritual faith and her attendance at Madame Flora's séance. Or perhaps her grief and desperation have simply compelled her to seek answers and consolation in unfamiliar places, thereby explaining her presence at the medium's parlour. When, after much encouragement from the Gobineaus, she finally begins to believe that she has made contact with her deceased daughter, one of her first questions is "...is it evil what I'm doing?"⁷⁵

According to Stanislavsky the truest dramatic and emotional impact created on stage evolves from the struggle an audience witnesses as the performer attempts to overcome

... obstacles ... [and] the more difficult it is to overcome the obstacle, the more actively the [scene] will develop and the feelings ... will become deeper and more expressive ... [as] a result of the conflict...⁷⁶

Mrs. Nolan's spirituality is not directly referred to in Menotti's notes, nor in the libretto, but the fact that she utters the word 'evil' in association with 'spiritualist' practices suggests a spiritual or moral uncertainty regarding her own choices and actions. Although timidity, scepticism and grief are all legitimate reasons for Mrs. Nolan to visit a medium and for her behaviour at the seance, portraying her hesitation as an internal crisis of faith definitely provides the greatest dramatic opportunity to explore this character's personal conflict. Whatever her intentions are at the outset, Mrs. Nolan's reactions to this experience are definitely reflective of a number of Menotti's preoccupations and themes that recur throughout this work.

⁷⁵ Menotti, G.C. *The Medium. Piano/Vocal Score*, (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1997) 27

⁷⁶ Cole, T. *Acting. A Handbook of the Stanislavski Method*, (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1955) 53, 54

By the second act Mrs. Nolan appears to have surrendered much of her individuality. Menotti has the three customers return even more staunchly united than they had been at the end of their act one scene when they hurried out of Baba's home in a confused group. Emotionally they are now much closer as they are better acquainted and have their terrible grief in common. Dramatically they appear united as this time they physically all arrive together and continue to move as a unit for the duration of their time on stage. Musically their trio of vocal lines are also now more tightly entwined than in their earlier ensembles. By the end of this scene the trio are directed to "stand expressionless like automatons"⁷⁷ as they sing, ignoring Baba's attempts to explain her deception. Their melodic lines drone on with repetitious rhythmic monotony and are tightly intertwined harmonically, with an almost chant-like quality⁷⁸. In this way Menotti has these three characters, a trinity, symbolise a blind unshakable faith, which "like a wall... stands between them and Baba."⁷⁹ Their physical, dramatic and musical solidarity is presented in stark contrast to Baba's increasing fear and confusion as she questions her own rational, cynical belief system.

Even though Mrs. Nolan's presence in the score is limited to just over twenty short lines of recitative and a few pages of ensemble singing, Menotti has still managed to create a detailed picture of her. In the space of two short scenes we are privileged to witness both her external social face, as well as her private anguish. He achieves this through her very human actions and responses, and through the accompanying orchestration. In conjunction with this, the insights that can be gained through the prospective performer's research of Menotti's background, of his various social and musical influences, and of the historical and contemporaneous social and political environments in which the piece was both composed and set, arguably enables the development of a more internalised understanding of the character, resulting in a more realistic and believable performance.

In *Stanislavski on Opera*, Elizabeth R. Hapgood (translator) states that Stanislavski "felt instinctively that music could greatly enhance the effectiveness of an actor since the work of a really good composer provides such a powerful base from which dramatic expression can derive not only stimulus but also a

⁷⁷ *ibid*, 95

⁷⁸ Menotti, G.C. *The Medium. Piano/Vocal Score*, (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1997) 95 to 98

⁷⁹ Fryer, J.A. *A Guide to the Study and Performance of Three Operas of Gian-Carlo Menotti* (Columbia University Teachers College. 1974) 90

sense of direction."⁸⁰ According to Benedetti, when the artist "plots the course of his role – the climaxes and moments of relaxation, the moments of high and low energy – [he] sees his role within the context of the dramatic structure as a whole."⁸¹ In addition to this, she emphasises the importance of an actor observing the punctuation of the script. Stanislavski applied these ideas to the opera libretto, and equally to its musical score. "Listen to the music. It will reveal what lies beneath the text."⁸² he advised singers.

Even before she has uttered her first word, Menotti has already musically introduced Mrs. Nolan's agitated emotional state. In act one, after Baba's clients enter her parlour and exchange greetings, there is a full bar of paused silence before Mrs. Nolan timidly offers up her hesitant "Good evening."⁸³ The upward inflection of the two words, rising a fourth, sounds more like a question than a greeting, betraying her uncertainty. Menotti reinforces her reticence throughout this scene with almost every one of her lines beginning on the weakest beat of the bar, and by having over half of her entries preceded by a pause. Benedetti stresses the dramatic emotional impact that 'psychological pauses'⁸⁴ can achieve. As demonstrated in Mrs. Nolan's vocal lines, these pauses "indicates the state of mind and...mood"⁸⁵ of the character. Also, up until this point most of the musical expression markings in Mrs. Nolan's accompaniment have reflected her trepidation. Dramatic moments are often mirrored in the orchestration, such as Mrs. Nolan's overly excited, sudden *forte* outburst when it occurs to her that she may hear her dead daughter Doodly's voice again, or the *molto piu agitato* in her accompaniment when she asks Mrs Gobineau a question whose answer she fears.

The only exceptions to this occur during and immediately after the séance. Throughout the séance Menotti musically builds a sense of urgency as Mrs. Nolan becomes more courageous and begins to question the voice that she believes belongs to Doodly. Throughout this section Mrs. Nolan's agitation is still evident in the *allegretto mosso* accompaniment, but as her confidence increases, Menotti finally begins Mrs. Nolan's recitative phrases on the stronger downbeats of the bars, accenting her daughter's

⁸⁰ Stanislavski, C *Stanislavski on Opera* (New York: Routledge, 1998) ix

⁸¹ Menotti, G.C *The Medium, Piano/Vocal Score* (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1997) 108

⁸² Stanislavski, C *Stanislavski on Opera* (New York: Routledge, 1998) 15

⁸³ Menotti, G.C *The Medium, Piano/Vocal Score* (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1997) 14

⁸⁴ Benedetti, J *Stanislavski and The Actor* (USA: Routledge/Theatre Arts Books, 1998) 90

⁸⁵ *ibid*, 90

name as she calls "Doodly, Doodly."⁸⁶ This increases the impression of the intensity of her intention as she asks her 'daughter' more and more questions, in stark contrast to her previously hesitant, cowering behaviour. This added emphasis, or 'stress'⁸⁷ on particular words, not only adds 'vitality' and focuses attention, but also reveals the character's heightened level of "personal involvement in what is being said."⁸⁸ Both musically and dramatically this slow building tension results in exposing Mrs. Nolan's pain and desperate need for answers and comfort.

Stanislavski was said to have “envied musicians who had a set of words indicating tempo, rhythm and expression that provided a quick, universal way of communicating.”⁸⁹ In Donald Barra’s book *The Dynamic Performance*, Barra aims to provide performers with a guide to understanding musical expression and interpretation in order to “make an intelligent interpretive analysis ... [and] ... create a more vivid realization of the musical score.”⁹⁰

According to Barra, "the most important relationship in music, for performer and listener alike, is that which exists between *tension* and *energy*."⁹¹ He states that 'tonal energy' can be determined by the attributes "loudness, pace, timbre, and pitch."⁹² As Mrs. Nolan's 'conversation' with her daughter reaches its heart-wrenching climax, Menotti steadily increases the momentum and creates incredible tension through the juxtaposition of dynamics and the almost syncopated vocal lines of Mrs. Nolan and 'Doodly', played by Monica. As Mrs. Nolan's anxiety increases, so does her pitch, spanning over an octave, her dynamic increases to *presque crie* (almost screaming), and her successive semiquavers give the impression of increasing pace. Mrs. Nolan leaps out of her chair as she begs the ‘apparition’ of Doodly to explain what she means, and pleads with her to stay, all the while the haunting *pianissimo* of the orchestra is in stark and disturbing contrast to the emotional turmoil of Mrs. Nolan. Suddenly her agonised cry of “Doodly! Doodly!” is interrupted and the previously intense mood of the *pianissimo* accompaniment is shattered. With a chaotic *allegro agitato* and jarring *fortissimo* chords, the orchestra

⁸⁶ Menotti, G.C *The Medium, Piano/Vocal Score* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1997) 27-28

⁸⁷ Benedetti, J *Stanislavski and The Actor* (New York: Routledge/Theatre Arts Books, 1998) 92

⁸⁸ *ibid*, 92

⁸⁹ *ibid*, ix

⁹⁰ Barra, D *The Dynamic Performance* (London: Prentice-Hall International, Inc., 1983) vii-viii

⁹¹ Barra, D *The Dynamic Performance, A Performer's Guide to Musical Expression and Interpretation* (London: Prentice-Hall International, Inc., 1983) 2

⁹² *ibid*, 6

presses on relentlessly as Mrs. Gobineau tries to calm Mrs. Nolan's hysterical outburst and Mrs. Gobineau manages to coax her back into her seat. In stark contrast to this Monica has slowly begun to physically withdraw, all the while singing her monotonously repetitive and eerie chant, spanning no more than a minor third. As Monica attempts to 'fade away', her dynamic dies away also, to a ghostly *ppp*. Dramatically as well as musically, Menotti has created an explosive atmosphere in this scene, by exploiting the tension created by such strong contrasts between the characters' physical movements, the pitch and range of their melodic lines, their dynamic range, and their rhythm and tempo.

In act two Mrs. Nolan appears to enter Madame Flora's parlour with a newfound confidence. In harmony with Mrs. Gobineau, she greets Baba, the medium⁹³. Menotti has both dramatically and musically united the customers from this point onwards, having them perform predominantly in ensemble, both physically as a group, and musically as they sing in tight harmonies.

Mrs. Nolan only briefly separates from the ensemble vocally when she is zealously moved to defend their misguided belief in Madame Flora's abilities as a medium, and also for a moment when she questions her own judgement. Her pitch level rises as the emotional intensity of her justifications increase. Menotti extends her vocal line to the higher end of her mezzo-soprano range, adding a natural vocal intensity of tone to her pain and denial. The melodic contour of Mrs. Nolan's recitative follows what would be considered normal speech patterns, particularly indicating stress or insistence. In stark contrast to this, Mrs. Nolan's pitch dramatically drops almost an octave, to the lower and somewhat darker range of the voice, at her moment of realization. Her soul searching, four bar soliloquy reveals the depth of her confusion and pain when she asks herself, "Not to know my own daughter's voice! Could that be? Could that be?"⁹⁴ Mr. and Mrs. Gobineau then join in Mrs. Nolan's subdued introspection, and the group is again united by their disbelief and denial. The ensemble's energy continues to increase in conjunction with the orchestra's dynamic increase to *forte*. With dramatic indications such as 'excitedly' and 'almost fiercely' for the singers, Menotti creates a tense and explosive

⁹³ Menotti, G.C *The Medium*, Piano/Vocal Score (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1997) 85

⁹⁴ Menotti, G.C *The Medium*, Piano/Vocal Score (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1997) 91

atmosphere. He reinforces the "attributes of resonance ...pitch...loudness and pace [which Barra asserts produces] strong, clear-cut dramatic images."⁹⁵

The three clients cling desperately to their false hopes and dreams in a vain attempt to convince not only Baba but also, more importantly, themselves that they had actually communicated with their "dear departed."⁹⁶ Gathered around a protesting Baba, they "...suddenly stand expressionless like automatons"⁹⁷ and begin their chant-like plea for Baba to continue the séances and to facilitate their delusional belief in her 'powers'. Their melodic line flows and undulates within the range of no more than a fifth, barely interrupted by ever changing time signatures and rhythmic patterns. Without disturbing their momentum, Menotti places textual and rhythmic emphasis on both weak and strong beats within the bars, enhancing the eerie, haunting quality of their relentless pleading. Barra explains:

"the focal points of a musical impulse don't always coincide with the strong beats of the metric structure the principal focal points of the melody [can be] centred on the weaker ... beats of the measure [creating] an imbalanced, non-congruent pattern of development that enhances the dynamic intensity of the music and reinforces its forward momentum."⁹⁸

In contrast to the client's floating melody lines, Baba's un-pitched declamatory statements and demands serve to increase the growing dramatic tension. Finally, both Baba and the orchestra violently break the trio out of their trance with the crashing of *fortissimo allegro* chords, and Baba's cry of 'sudden fury' to "Get out of here, get out, get out!"⁹⁹

Given "Menotti's multifaceted dramatic proficiency as director, librettist and composer,"¹⁰⁰ the performer is arguably given ample information with which to create a fully realised characterization of Mrs. Nolan in an analysis of Menotti's score and libretto alone. However, armed also with an

⁹⁵ Barra, D *The Dynamic Performance, A performer's Guide to Musical Expression and Interpretation* (London: Prentice-Hall International, Inc., 1983) 9

⁹⁶ Menotti, G.C *The Medium, Piano/Vocal Score* (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1997) 15

⁹⁷ *ibid*, 94

⁹⁸ Barra, D *The Dynamic Performance, A performer's Guide to Musical Expression and Interpretation* (London: Prentice-Hall International, Inc., 1983) 55

⁹⁹ Menotti, G.C *The Medium, Piano/Vocal Score* (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1997) 98

¹⁰⁰ Hixon, D.L *Gian Carlo Menotti, A Bio-Bibliography* (USA: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 2000) 6

appreciation for the experiences and influences that contributed to shaping Menotti's compositional style and subject matter choices, as well as developing a sense of the social and cultural climate of this story and the characters, the performer also has a context within which to operate and make choices.

Even when engaged in the early stages of preparing a role, a performer's characterization should not be static and must be allowed to continue to evolve, and gradually a sense of the character should begin to emerge.¹⁰¹

Who is Mrs Nolan?

The character of Mrs. Nolan initially presents as a middle-aged widow who is literally desperate to find some solace in her loneliness and misery. So desperate that she is even prepared to investigate things she might normally have considered being 'evil.'¹⁰² Struggling with conflicting thoughts and emotions regarding her actions, she is physically and emotionally withdrawn, as she hesitantly interacts with the other characters. Although she gradually allows herself to be drawn into Baba's deception, her anxiety continues throughout act one and reaches its peak when it appears that 'Doodly' is leaving her once more. As Monica, posing as Doodly, gradually withdraws, Mrs. Nolan's fear and distress causes her voice to rise in pitch to a frenzied scream, revealing the extremes of emotion she is privately, and now publicly, experiencing.

By act two, Mrs. Nolan's journey has led her to a certain self-deception, which appears to provide her with a false sense of comfort and emotional calm. She has chosen to believe in Baba, and aligns herself with the supportive, and equally gullible, Mr. and Mrs. Gobineau. Physically, emotionally and vocally she seems stronger and more self-assured, which gives us a glimpse of the joyful and confident woman she may have been before the tragic deaths of her loved ones. However, her sense of relief and stability is short lived. This time, however she responds with more aggression, desperately defending the delusional happiness she has finally found.

By the final ensemble Mrs Nolan is completely emotionally drained, not wanting to believe that in her vulnerable state she could have been so callously fooled. Her stupor is only broken by Baba's frustrated

¹⁰¹ Benedetti, *J Stanislavski and The Actor* (USA: Routledge/Theatre Arts Books, 1998) 103

¹⁰² Menotti, G.C *The Medium, Piano/Vocal Score* (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1997) 27

yells, and the harsh reality of the deception and her own tragic gullibility sends Mrs. Nolan running from the room.

CONCLUSION

Preparing the role of Mrs. Nolan for performance, it became clear that there were a number of lines of enquiry that deserved consideration. An extensive analysis of the score and the libretto was the primary source upon which I based my dramatic choices for interpreting this minor, yet integral character.

Although it may offer perhaps a limited perspective, it is possible for an operatic score to reveal artistic, musical and literary insights into the social and creative climate of its day. Menotti's work *The Medium* provides a multi-layered commentary, or documentation of a particular approach to opera and music theatre traditions in mid twentieth-century America. In addition to this, both the music and libretto of this opera can't help but reveal various aspects of social issues such as historical and contemporary influences, social values, and ideals, all of which are essential to developing a thorough understanding of this character. A desire to broaden my search for insight into the music, drama and text of *The Medium* also led me to explore the implications of further historical and biographical information and perspectives. I therefore revisited the composer's life, and his musical influences experienced up to the point of composition.

As I investigated various perspectives, I developed a new appreciation for Menotti's masterful ability to convey dramatic characters through his music, as well as through text. Gaining a further understanding of Menotti's background and into some of the contemporaneous social and political issues of the time of *The Medium's* setting, enabled me to create and develop both a strong internal world for my portrayal of Mrs. Nolan, as well as an insight into the cultural and physical world around her. Consideration of the musical structure and style of the opera enhanced my understanding of the character making it easier to marry my dramatic choices to the music.

Constantin Stanislavski's 'method' of dramatic interpretation and Donald Barra's principles of music analysis have proved to be compatible and invaluable tools when analysing the score and its libretto. The outcome of this research was such that it influenced and shaped my choices regarding Mrs. Nolan's physicality, her intentions and subsequent actions, her vocal tone and colour, and her personal journey. I was able to create for myself a fairly clear image of the Mrs. Nolan that I believe Menotti may have envisaged.

The study shows that even minor operatic roles are deserving of serious consideration and preparation, and that it is of great benefit to the performer to direct research for characterisation not only to the score and libretto but also beyond.

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APPENDIX

Review excerpts of the Lyric Opera of Melbourne's June 2007 production of *The Medium*, performed at Chapel off Chapel, in which I played Mrs. Nolan.

"Lyric Opera's first night had a real dramatic intensity and is a fine example of what a small company can achieve. Director Anna Kavanagh's intelligent and musically aware stagecraft allows the music and plot to provide the drama ... she shapes the development strongly. She is aided by the simple but effective set, the crisp urgent and sensitive music direction of conductor Christopher van Tuinen, and strong performances by all five singers ... The clients, Julie Torpy, Adrian Tamburini and Kerrie Bolton all give top-drawer characterizations." (Barney Zwartz. *The Age*. June 6, 2007)

"Spot-on casting and terrific performances all round produced a most enjoyable evening of American music ... [the director's] straight-forward production kept the action unfolding at a pace Alfred Hitchcock would have approved of ... Kerrie Bolton, Julie Torpy and Adrian Tamburini provided quality support as the medium's duped customers." (Sybil Nolan. *The Sun-Herald*. June 8, 2007)

"Kerrie Bolton carried off her role very well as the mother desperate to communicate with the shade of her 16-year-old daughter ... swiftly leaping any barriers to faith, even when Monica, impersonating the young girl's voice, makes a slip and speaks of a gold locket that Mrs. Nolan does not recognize."
(Clive O'Connell. *Opera Opera* 2007)

"... and Mrs. Nolan (Kerrie Bolton) a desperate mother who has lost her 16 year old daughter and wants to contact her ... the singing is magnificent."
(www.theoperaboys.com June 3, 2007)