

Stigmatising Faith? Differing Modes of Sanctification in Gian-Carlo Menotti's *The Saint of Bleecker Street*

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Abstract

Although best known for his Christmas opera *Amahl and the Night Visitors* (which is often asserted to be the most frequently performed music drama of the twentieth century), Gian-Carlo Menotti composed other operas in which he explored the confrontation between religious faith and practice on the one hand and scepticism on the other. In his heralded *The Saint of Bleecker Street* (1954), this duality is manifested in a case of a girl believed by other Catholics to have received the stigmata, while her brother rejects this and attributes the phenomenon to illness. It is argued in the present article that this work, which received numerous awards after its introduction in New York and within months was being performed internationally, can be interpreted more deeply as an exploration of the evergreen theme of popular religion confronting honest doubt in an evolving social and religious environment. It is also demonstrated that apart from the stigmata the purported 'saint' ministered to other Italian-Americans in conventional, non-thaumaturgic ways.

Keywords: Menotti, *The Saint of Bleecker Street*, opera, Italian-Americans, saint, stigmata

Introduction

The stigmata, it seems, have never given up the ghost and faded into the oblivion of ostensibly antiquated religious experience. Nor has this subject, whether in the hands of theologians, psychologists, authors of popular spiritual literature, or even crafters of detective fiction, lost all its macabre appeal. An

appreciable body of scholarly literature has explored various aspects of this phenomenon which by no means is limited to Christians of supposedly intense religious fervour. Cases of Muslim ascetics, for example, have been recorded in which they bear wounds purportedly analogous to those incurred by the prophet Mohamed in battle. Rarely, however, has stigmatisation found its way into the lyric theatre, despite its considerable thematic and emotional potential. On the other hand, to cite but one relatively recent manifestation in popular culture, the supernatural horror film of 1999, *Stigmata*, attracted relatively large audiences but met with severely critical reviews. As one film commentator in Washington put it, 'Stigmata doesn't need a critic; it needs an exorcist' (Hunter 1999: C1, C5)¹.

One heralded instance of this topic's employment for artistic purposes is the opera *The Saint of Bleecker Street* by the eminent Italian-American composer Gian-Carlo Menotti. This work was lauded far more than it has been understood. Reviews of its première were generally enthusiastic². Within a fortnight of its initial performance, the New York Music Critics Circle named it the best opera of 1954³. Subsequently, a parallel coterie, the New York Drama Critics Circle, bestowed on Menotti its annual prize for creating the best musical of that year⁴. In May 1955 he was summoned to Columbia University to receive a prestigious Pulitzer Prize in the music category⁵. To be sure, the work was much less warmly received in Europe. When Menotti took it to Italy

¹ Stephen Hunter, "'Stigmata': No Redeeming Value', *The Washington Post*, 10 September 1999, pp. C1, C5.

² For a representative sample of the reviews in American newspapers and magazines, see *inter alia* Olin Downes, 'Gian-Carlo Menotti Music Drama Bows at the Broadway', *The New York Times*, 28 December 1954, p. 21; Brooks Atkinson, 'A Powerful Work of the Theatre Returns Christianity to the Common People', *The New York Times*, 28 December 1954, p. 21; and Walter F. Kerr, 'Menotti at Peak with "Saint of Bleecker Street"', *The Washington Post*, 2 January 1955, p. H4.

³ 'Critics' Citation to Shostakovich', *The New York Times*, 11 January 1955, p. 19.

⁴ 'Drama Critics Circle Makes Awards', *The New York Times*, 16 May 1955, p. 27.

⁵ 'Pulitzer Prizes', *The New York Times*, 3 May 1955, p. 3. This was Menotti's second Pulitzer Prize; he had received his first for his opera *The Consul*.

in May 1955, its merely four performances had a mixed reception at the renowned La Scala Opera House in Milan, where there were reportedly twenty-five curtain calls but also considerable ‘derisive whistling’ at its European première⁶. At the prestigious newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, a critic hailed *La santa di Bleecker Street*, as it was titled in Italian, and pointed to parallels between it and George Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*, a comparison which may have struck some knowing readers as stretched. In place of African-Americans in the South, Menotti had substituted ‘the *wops* of the kind found in Little Italy in New York’. This reviewer tempered his praise only slightly by lamenting that the pronunciation of Gloria Lane, who sang the part of Desideria, was *incomprendibile*⁷. Four months later, Viennese opera lovers were treated to *The Saint of Bleecker Street* at their city’s Volksoper, but critical commentary was reserved, with one critic expressing in the daily newspaper *Neuer Kurier* his astonishment that the work had been heralded in New York. He suggested that in Vienna the stigmatised Annina was simply ‘too remote to stir up general compassion’⁸. In November Menotti’s opera was staged at West Berlin’s City Opera House but reportedly got only a ‘moderate reception’⁹. Although this work never became a standard part of any European operatic repertoire, as late as 2001 Menotti arranged for it to be performed at the Festival dei Due Mondi, an annual affair which he had established in 1958 in Spoleto, to mark his ninetieth birthday.

Turning from contemporary reception to scholarly analysis, *The Saint of Bleecker Street* has always been vastly overshadowed by Menotti’s internationally renowned *Amahl and the Night Visitors*¹⁰. *The Saint of Bleecker Street* is not mentioned in such studies as those by Ted Harrison (1994) and Ian Wilson (1988), and it receives little attention in standard works about

⁶ “‘The Saint’ at La Scala”, *The New York Times*, 9 May 1955, p. 26.

⁷ “‘La santa di Bleecker Street’”, *Corriere della Sera* (Milan), 9-10 May 1955, p. 6.

⁸ ‘Vienna Cool to “Saint”’, *The New York Times*, 18 September 1955, p. 76.

⁹ ‘Menotti Work in Berlin’, *The New York Times*, 1 November 1955, p. 26.

¹⁰ One minor exception to this generalisation was published in French more than a decade ago, but in it the treatment of *The Saint of Bleecker Street* is very brief and plays second fiddle to other concerns. See Walter Zidaric, ‘Immigration, différence et intégration dans *The Consul et The Saint of Bleecker Street* de Gian Carlo Menotti’, *Revue LISA*, II, no. 3 (2004), 188-200.

Menotti. Even in Gruen's biography the analysis of this work as such is sketchy (Gruen 1978: 122-123). The present article is intended as a first step towards filling the resulting *lacuna* in the historiography of both religious music and stigmatisation. It is argued that while on one level *The Saint of Bleecker Street* obviously presents divergent attitudes towards the stigmata, on another it is relevant to a broader spectrum of people to whom that phenomenon has little meaning because the work explores the evergreen theme of fervent religious conviction *versus* intense scepticism in an evolving social environment. However, it will be demonstrated that *The Saint of Bleecker Street* is also an exploration of a girl's personal witness to her faith in a very challenging ethnic milieu where many people with varying degrees and expression of spiritual fervour are caught in a crisis of assimilation between the Old World and the New. The stream of popular culture, in other words, yields lessons from which religious lessons can be learned, as students of *e.g.* music, literature, and the cinema have long understood.

The Stigmata in the Early Twentieth Century

Menotti's employment of this controversial phenomenon was arguably timely in the history of Catholic piety. During his youth in Italy, and continuing after his emigration to American shores, several purported bearers of the stigmata gained extensive international publicity while evoking no mean quantity of criticism from sceptics. The first of these was his compatriot, Francesco Forgione, an Italian friar better known by his Franciscan name 'Padre Pio'. Born in 1887, he began to experience visions as a young man, and is said to have received the stigmata in 1918. By the early 1920s he was widely known—and his legitimacy disputed—because of these phenomena. During Menotti's formative years in northern Italy and after his removal to the United States of America debates raged in Italy and internationally about the authenticity of his stigmata. The dispute became entwined with ecclesiastical politics¹¹. Menotti

¹¹ The literature about Padre Pio is extensive and, from a scholarly perspective, of greatly varying quality. Three accessible works are Sergio Luzzatto, *Padre Pio: Miracles and Politics in a Secular Age*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2007); C. Bernard Ruffin, *Padre Pio: The True Story*. Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, 1982); and Renzo Allegri, *Padre Pio: Man of Hope*. Ann Arbor: Servant Publications, 2000).

granted that his personal encounter with Padre Pio was tenuous. While composing *The Saint of Bleeker Street*, he visited the famous priest and stigmatist, who, however, upon hearing that Menotti was no longer connected with the church, terminated the interview. The composer thus left without insights into the stigmata but with the unforgettable experience of having observed Padre Pio celebrate Mass with hands clearly bearing the marks of the stigmata (Gruen 1978: 121-122).

A second internationally famous stigmatist, who may have served as a model for the central character in *The Saint of Bleeker Street*, was Therese Neumann from the Bavarian village of Konnersreuth. Also a Franciscan, this woman was born in 1898 and by her own testimony began to have visions of Jesus Christ and Biblical events in the early 1920s, *i.e.* not long after experiencing inexplicable healings from various ailments. She received the stigmata in 1926 when Menotti was a teenager in Italy. Details of Neumann's peculiar spiritual life soon became widely known within Germany and abroad. Miraculous cures were sometimes attributed to her intervention, although independent confirmation of her efficacy in this regard was not adduced. After the National Socialists came to power in Germany in 1933 she was closely observed by the Gestapo, or Secret State Police, apparently because her popularity posed a potential threat to the totalitarian authority of Hitler's government. Neumann's international renown continued to grow after the restoration of peace in Europe in 1945.

Although allegedly psychological phenomena in religious dress have often been reported in various kinds of Protestant churches, not least those of charismatic bent, among Christians the stigmata have generally been regarded as a distinctly Roman Catholic phenomenon. Not that the Church of Rome has wholeheartedly endorsed it. Indeed, although some of the men and women whom it has canonised as saints have been stigmatists, the vast majority have not. The Catholic Church has not recognised the presence of this phenomenon in individuals as evidence of their sainthood. In the Catholic tradition there is no direct linkage between official sainthood and the stigmata; attribution of such status to people who evince wounds supposedly similar to those of Jesus on the cross is in the popular religious mentality, not the theology of the Church. Indeed, its hierarchy long viewed Padre Pio, possibly the most renowned male stigmatist of modern times, with considerable scepticism. Nevertheless, Popes Pius XI, Pius XII, and Paul V gradually eased restrictions

on the veneration of him, and he was canonised in 2002, some thirty-four years after his death in 1968.

As commentators have observed, recorded cases of stigmatisation have occurred significantly more frequently in Italy than elsewhere in Christendom, although the Italian numerical dominance declined somewhat in the twentieth century. According to one study which calculated reported cases up to 1908, 229 of 321 were in Italy. Nearly all of the others were French, Spanish, and Portuguese. In the twentieth century the distribution changed notably, with numerous cases being reported in the Americas and other parts of the world. However, in the middle of the twentieth century, *i.e.* the time of most immediate relevance to the opera under present consideration, the stigmata were still regarded as generally an Italian or at least Mediterranean Catholic phenomenon (Harrison 1994: 9).

Gian-Carlo Menotti as a Transatlantic Catholic and Ex-Catholic

Menotti was almost singularly equipped for composing an opera focusing on Italian immigrant religious phenomena in New York but also incorporating secular elements which intersect with those of a spiritual nature. Born in the northern Italian village of Cadegliano-Viconago, only a stone's throw from the Swiss border, in 1911, this son of a coffee importer evinced his creativity by composing his first song at age seven and writing both the music and libretto of an opera four years later. He matriculated at the Milan Conservatory shortly before becoming a teenager. Menotti's widowed mother sent him to the renowned Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia in 1928. After graduating from Curtis, he and a former classmate, Samuel Barber, moved to Austria and eventually settled in the village of St. Wolfgang in the picturesque Salzkammergut. There Menotti composed *Amelia al ballo*, a lightweight, satirical work with one of the few libretti he wrote in his native Italian (Gruen 1978: 13-22, 24-7, 33). He returned to the United States of America before that country became embroiled in the Second World War and saw his career gradually ascend. Menotti would spend most of his life in that country while retaining Italian citizenship and cultivating strong cultural ties to his homeland. Of obvious relevance to the thematic content of *The Saint of Bleecker Street* is his spiritual odyssey. As his chief biographer John Gruen has emphasised,

Menotti was strongly influenced by his birthright Roman Catholic faith. In one consequential incident, in his childhood a pious nurse reportedly took him to a shrine of the Virgin Mary, after which he was cured of lameness in one leg. This episode during Menotti's formative years is obliquely echoed in his *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, in which an impoverished crippled boy gives the Magi, then *en route* to Bethlehem to see the Christ child, his crutch as his only possible gift, and with that act of charity he is healed. Menotti would eventually leave the Catholic Church, and later in life insisted that he was not religious. Gruen has generalised, however, that 'throughout his life Menotti would always be fascinated with the Church and its protagonists—the saints, the martyrs, and the religious philosophers—who instilled in him an ambiguous yearning for spiritual knowledge and revelation.' The seeds planted in his childhood would germinate artistically decades later: 'Miracles, the mysteries of the stigmata, the shadowy world of rite and ritual, the ethos and ethics of religious consciousness, and the grappling with the unknown would years later make themselves evident in such works as *The Island God*, *The Saint of Bleecker Street*, *The Death of the Bishop of Brindisi*, and *Martin's Lie*' (Gruen 1978: 10).

By the late 1930s the general notion of 'faith' had emerged as a theme in Menotti's operas, and it became a *Leitmotiv* in the following decade. It is evident, though not in an explicitly religious form, in *Amelia al Ballo*, which had its American première in Philadelphia in 1937 and in the original Italian in San Remo the following year. During the war, Menotti examined in greater depth the negative consequences of blind faith, and after the restoration of peace this issue provided the fulcrum on which dramatic tensions in Menotti's works were featured. This was especially the case in *The Medium*, which was first performed at Columbia University in 1946 and in a revised version elsewhere in New York in February 1947. The piece is not explicitly political but was inspired by Menotti's attendance at a séance, after which he pondered 'whether belief was a creative power and whether skepticism could destroy creative powers' (Hixon 2000: 5). In brief, the work, which one of Menotti's biographers labelled 'a tale of degradation, total and hopeless' (Hixon 2000: 5) explores how a fake spiritualist named Madame Flora cheated credulous clients for years but then had a horrific experience in a séance which cast her into a pit of mental illness in which she inadvertently and in a fit of rage murders her adopted son. Generously called 'a perfect opera' and sometimes regarded as his most mature work to date (Hixon 2000: 5), *The Medium* helped to propel

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Menotti's career. The question of faith, concentrating more innocuously on its potentially therapeutic power, lay at the foundation of his renowned work of 1951, *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, which lies beyond the scope of our present consideration.

However, at some point during his early career as an increasingly successful composer in America, Menotti's early faith underwent severe erosion, and he left the Church. This did not, however, make him entirely spiritually bereft. On the contrary, he acknowledged an abiding attitudinal duality towards the Christian faith. Interviewed in the mid-1970s, explained this conflict in his soul by referring to an Enlightenment sceptic and a pious Russian man of letters. 'My mind is much too rational to abandon itself to faith,' Menotti professed. 'I am a would-be Voltaire, yearning to be Tolstoy, if you know what I mean. And it is this very duality in my character, this inner conflict, which I have tried to express in some of my operas' (Gruen 1978: 122). As will be amply demonstrated below, this spiritual dualism came patently to the fore in *The Saint of Bleeker Street*, as some critics observed.

The Saint of Bleeker Street: Plot Synopsis

Notwithstanding Menotti's status as one of the most eminent American composers of the twentieth century, *The Saint of Bleeker Street* has nearly faded into oblivion. Consequently, a brief synopsis of its plot is essential to an understanding of its principal themes. The story unfolds after the end of the Second World War in the Little Italy section of New York. An apparently teenaged girl named Annina lives in a tenement with her domineering brother, Michele. In the first act, on Good Friday neighbours gather in their modest home to witness the pious, sickly Annina receive the stigmata on her hands, a phenomenon that has struck her on previous Good Fridays. In accordance with popular Italian popular piety, they regard her as an uncanonised saint who can work miracles. Annina nowhere claims such status but makes known her desire to become a nun. Michele, however, who is hostile to conventional Catholic beliefs and practices, in part because he regards them as inimical to assimilation in the New World, furiously opposes the neighbours' devotion to his sister and violently drives them off the premises. The incompatibility of the siblings' mutually exclusive positions provides the underlying dramatic tension and comes to varied expression in several subsequent scenes.

Michele continues to play a villainous role. At a party following the wedding of his sister's friend, Carmela, he has an increasingly vocal argument with his inebriated mistress, Desideria, who accuses him of having an incestuous relationship with Annina. In a fit of rage, he murders this woman with a knife and flees. Subsequently, as a fugitive from justice he meets his sister in a subway station and in a show of vulgarity curses her because of her desire to enter a convent. Eventually Annina is granted special permission to join a religious order, despite her poor health, and in a moving final scene she takes her vows, becoming a bride of Christ while wearing her friend's wedding dress. She collapses and dies during this ritual. Michele, however, remains unmoved. *The Saint of Bleecker Street* thus ends with the tension between the two protagonists unresolved and the matter of Annina's stigmata eclipsed by the partial fulfilment of her vision for her vocation.

Degrees of Credulousness

Among the Italian-Americans who respond in one way or another to Annina's stigmata and her supposed ability to heal miraculously, the degree of credibility varies from total acceptance to outright rejection. This is a microcosm of attitudes in the Roman Catholic Church generally to the phenomenon of stigmatisation. Among some of the neighbours who crowd into the modest tenement which Annina and her brother inhabit, there is a crescendo of confidence in her reported visions and thaumaturgic capabilities. Her friends Carmela and Assunta sing that she has seen Saint Michael and two young archangels, and that she has seen Saint Peter holding the keys to heaven. The Virgin Mary has also appeared to Annina, and after her brother had cursed that saint, 'someone saw that image there on the wall weep tears of blood.' In a duet these two girls, one a soprano and the other a mezzo soprano, proclaim, 'She's a dove, She's a burning flame, She's a lily, She's the cooling wave, She's the chosen one' (Menotti 1954; 7-8). On the other hand, a middle-aged woman, Maria Corona, whose son is mute and mentally handicapped, is initially sceptical. 'One always hears about these miracles,' she states. 'Then – nothing happens.' In response to this disbelief, Assunta points to an older man and professes, 'He was blind, and she made him see again,' while Carmela adds, 'There's no doubt she's a saint,' and, echoing what had been attributed to Therese Neumann, 'Every Holy Friday she suffers the Passion of Our Lord' (Menotti 1954: 7). Later Maria Corona becomes a firm believer.

The priest, Don Marco, nowhere commits himself explicitly on the matter of Annina's attributed miracles. However, as allowed by the official position of the Roman Catholic Church, he apparently believes that she has received the stigmata at least once. Indeed, in the first scene he informs the neighbours who have gathered that Annina's vision has begun' and states cautiously, 'Should she once again be blessed with the stigmata, be gentle with her.' He threatens to evict from the apartment anyone who attempts to touch her wounds (Menotti 1954: 10). When asked by Annina's brother whether he believes that her visions are 'the work of God, or the delusions of a sick mind', Don Marco is evasive, replying that 'a priest is not a judge but only a guide' and states, 'I do not say that I believe in this, but she believes and must be guided' (Menotti 1954: 14).

At a sceptical extreme stands Michele, nailing his colours to the mast of disbelief. He does not mince words in bluntly declaring to his ailing sister that she is 'imagining things'. Michele persists in his criticism, calling her 'childish', and, abandoning all tact, reminding her that as a slow learner at school she was ridiculed by other pupils who called her a 'numbskull' (Menotti 1954: 21-22). He never changes his underlying position that Annina is delusional, although after he becomes a fugitive from justice he expresses a need for her guidance, apparently sensing her essential love for him and possibly believing that she has some divine power.

Italians Caught between Two Cultures

To an appreciable degree, *The Saint of Bleecker Street*, particularly the reactions of many of the characters to Annina's stigmata and supposed ability to effect miracles, as well as their behaviour towards each other, can be interpreted as a broadside against certain aspects of Italian-American life. Setting a negative tone in the first scene, many of the characters, both named individuals and vaguely defined crowds, are portrayed as unintelligent, unsavory, repulsive, or violently objectionable. As they wait impatiently for Annina to emerge from her room, Maria Corona and an unnamed 'young woman' trade angry quips and, according to the stage directions, 'almost come to blows'. The latter then calls Maria Corona a 'strumpet' and issues a challenge; 'I bet that you don't even know who's the father of your child!' The target of her insult returns the favour: 'You dirty bitch! . . . I bet there isn't a man on Bleecker Street who hasn't slept with you!' (Menotti 1954: 8-9). When

Annina enters, several of the expectant neighbours try ‘hysterically’ to touch her, while the priest and three of the women ‘vainly fight’ them off. Observing this *mêlée* in his spartan home, Michele orders the throng to leave the premises and calls them ‘Clowns! Leeches! Fanatics!’ while threatening to call the police. He also demands that Don Marco depart (Menotti 1954: 12-13). That priest counters by suggesting that she might be a saint, but her brother ridicules such ‘superstition’ and asserts that the people ‘worship God out of defeat’. To him, these Italian-Americans’ religion was merely a compensatory response to their worldly disappointments: ‘They look for wonders to forget their poverty, to redeem their failure’ (Menotti 1954: 44). One of the women, Assunta, in effect corroborates this in a conversation with Annina: ‘When you have six children and a drunken husband like I do, you’ll be sure to go to heaven when you die!’ (Menotti 1954: 18).

Male Italian-Americans are also generally portrayed negatively, some in ways that reflect popular images of them as criminally-minded. Maria Corona informs Annina that members of a local organisation, the Sons of San Gennaro, are angry because the ostensible saint refuses to participate in their planned procession and might ‘drag you away by force’. Carmela defends her friend’s unwillingness, knowing those ‘boys’ to be ‘roughnecks, hotheads, bullies and quick with knives’ (Menotti 1954: 19). In the end, of course, it is her brother who wields the deadly blade.

Before murdering Desideria at the wedding party, Michele delivers a partial speech upbraiding his fellow Italian-Americans. Under the influence of wine, and seething with resentment at the unwillingness of his ethnic fellows to accept him because of his apparent abandonment of their national heritage, he lambasts them as cultural misfits. ‘Although you made this land your home, you live like strangers,’ he declares. Michele accuses them of feeling ‘ashamed’ to identify themselves as Italians, but on the other hand, they cling to elements of their Mediterranean culture and vilify him for not doing so. He believes their cultural baggage contains a lamentable amount of superstition rooted in the religious folkways of their homeland which impedes their assimilation and advancement in American society. Yet he himself is suspended between the two sides of the Atlantic. ‘I do want to belong, belong to this new world,’ Michele insists, adding that he does not want to be told, ‘You foreigner, go back where you have come from!’ But his heart is divided. He tries to assure his audience that if he ‘could see just once that sad, sweet

Modes of Sanctification in Gian-Carlo Menotti's The Saint of Bleecker Street country', he 'perhaps' would be proud to say, 'I am Italian' (Menotti 1954: 34-35).

Annina's Sober Sainthood

Apart from Michele's unstinting opposition, there is no suggestion of firm disbelief in his sister's stigmatisation or ability to be a channel for miraculous healings. However, as the plot of *The Saint of Bleecker Street* unfolds, it gradually becomes clear that Annina, without in any way losing her loyalty to the popular Catholic piety which motivates her friends and neighbours, takes on a different, non-thaumaturgic sanctity. In her modest way and in accordance with her humble faith, the girl ministers to some of those around her. In fact, she explicitly denies to her brother that she is a saint (presumably in the miracle-working sense that he and the other Italian-Americans mean) (Menotti 1954: 21), and nowhere does she claim to heal anyone's ailments. Furthermore, Annina has no desire to be paraded by the Sons of San Gennaro as a holy person in their procession; they must abduct her to make her participate in that street ritual. However, she firmly believes that Jesus has appeared to her, and when Michele asks her derisively why she believes God would choose her for sanctity, she answers, 'Perhaps because I love him,' a reply that suggests she may believe that she has some special mission to perform. That said, Annina re-emphasises that her foremost desire is to become a nun (Menotti 1954: 21-22).

In the latter half of *The Saint of Bleecker Street* she repeatedly seeks to serve others in their hour of acute need. This begins with her brother. Michele expresses his desire to liberate Annina from the street where they live, from its inhabitants whose 'blood is darkened by memories and fears[,] Medalled with idols, daggered by ears.' In that captive, religiously atavistic environment, he believes, 'the young are branded by a relentless past', They 'receive its secret signals, and bear the enslaving mark'. Annina counters by professing that she can lead him to the 'City of God' where love, joy in sobriety, and 'peace without sleep' prevail (Menotti 1954: 23). She subsequently attempts unsuccessfully to take her inebriated brother home after he appears at the wedding party, and in a protracted scene she ministers ritually as an angel of death to the mortally wounded Desideria (Menotti 1954: 36-39). In one of the final acts of her ministry, Annia tries to convince her fugitive brother to surrender to the police (Menotti 1954: 43, 45).

Contemporary Catholic Reactions

Particularly noteworthy for our purposes are the varied reactions of critics in Catholic periodicals. In certain respects they echoed remarks made in the secular press, but some of these religiously inclined commentators focused on aspects of the work which were ignored or given only cursory treatment elsewhere. Our consideration of Catholic reactions must be limited to only a small number in prominent national magazines.

One of the first brief commentaries appeared in the Jesuit weekly *America* less than a month after the première on Broadway. Theophilus Lewis called *The Saint of Bleecker Street* a production ‘worthy of a civilized stage and a mature audience’, and he found it gratifying that a religious drama would not be saccharine but rather embody ‘all the stark realism of the Old Testament’. He felt gratified that such ‘all-too-human delinquencies’ as violence and alleged incest had not been ‘pulled out of their context in life and glamorized to appeal to prurience’; rather, they were ‘balanced by scenes of reverence, even exaltation, and instances of touching human affection’. Lewis acknowledged the centrality of the stigmata as a phenomenon that had convinced Annina’s neighbours that she was ‘an uncanonized saint’ and had fulfilled a second function by reinforcing her brother’s conviction that she was ‘sick’ and needed medical care which, however, he could not afford to give her (Lewis 1955: 434).

Writing in *Catholic World*, Euphemia Van Rensselaer Wyatt concentrated on depicting *The Saint of Bleecker Street* as a fascinating artistic representation of a little-known ethno-cultural ingredient in the American melting pot. ‘How many New Yorkers realize that within a few miles of Park Avenue there is a swath of Italy where grandmothers still only understand the dialects of their childhood, ’she asked, ‘where faith burns bright and patronal saints are paraded under arches of flowers and lights with the rejoicing of brass bands and scampering children clad as angels and the prayers of the black-veiled sodality women carrying lighted candles?’ (Wyatt 1955: 385) This fervently pious setting had been brought to light in Menotti’s opera. Wyatt also expressed warm appreciation for the musical attainment, calling the score ‘Menotti’s richest and finest’ to date and observing that the ‘words and music implement each other in the action’ but lamenting that at times the diction was unintelligible (Wyatt 1955: 385).

Conspicuously absent from Wyatt’s review is anything more than the

briefest mention of the phenomena of the stigmata. She merely noted that they had appeared on Annina's hands as the 'focus of the first scene' and that her brother had 'violently' driven out the neighbours who had entered the apartment to observe them (Wyatt 1955: 385). Moreover, this critic treated the underlying and controlling theme of piety *versus* scepticism very succinctly by declaring that in the Italian-American immigrant environment 'the old faith must battle with the materialism called progress' (Wyatt 1955:385).

Richard Hayes offered a far more penetrating analysis of the spiritual dimensions of this intensely religious opera in the liberal Catholic weekly *The Commonweal*, as whose regular drama and cinema critic he served. His comments reflected a divided mind about *The Saint of Bleeker Street*, and he was consciously less enthusiastic about the work than were certain other critics. Hayes lauded the 'poetic truth' of the piece as 'large and profound'. He noted that the two siblings around whose tense relationship the plot revolves were polar types, the one vividly embodying Catholic piety and the other less convincingly an opposite and atheistic extreme of hostility to religious faith. The stigmata, Hayes underscored, registered Annina's piety, and to him her religious fervour seemed credible and part of an artistic integrity. On the other hand, the off-putting character of Michele was the weak link in the creative chain. Hayes quoted Menotti on the latter's desire to 'shock' his audiences and suggested that this was the partial undoing of *The Saint of Bleeker Street*. The work had its strengths, he granted, especially in musical terms (which, to be sure, Hayes did not explore in detail), but overall it did not impress him as an aesthetically self-contained work, as *Amahl and the Night Visitors* and certain other operas by Menotti had done. Rather, the plot seemed too contrived, not least owing to what he regarded as sensationalist intrusions, such as the accusation levelled at Michele by his girlfriend that he was simultaneously in an incestuous relationship with his sister. Other aspects were poorly developed, he opined. Why, Hayes wondered, had Michele become so explosively alienated from the Catholic faith? There were simply too many loose threads in a tapestry not woven nearly as tightly as it should have been to be aesthetically pleasing and coherent (Hayes 1955: 476-477).

Menotti's Candid Comments on His Purpose

An analysis of *The Saint of Bleeker Street* in the context of the history of drama, and particularly religious drama, is facilitated, but also arguably

frustrated, by candid comments Menotti made in an essay published in *The New York Times* in 1955. In a response to his critics, he defended his approach to a religious topic. Noting that in contrast to musical comedies, new serious operas did not have a sizable ‘ready-made’ audience in the United States of America. In that country, Menotti lamented, one tended to see ‘the same old faces’ and hear ‘the same old remarks’ in audiences. He contrasted this with Rome, where even ‘the tailor, the baker, and the mason’ could routinely be seen at artistic events. One of his own purposes, Menotti explained, was to be a ‘missionary’ for artistic expression and use his provocative innovations to attract more diverse audiences. He allowed that these forays beyond the pale of the conventional could give producers financial headaches. Among the iconoclasm in *The Saint of Bleeker Street*, the composer explained, was his rejection of ‘what has by now become the sine qua non for a successful production: an escapist ending or a pat solution’. Breaking that mould, he thought, was ‘perhaps the boldest and surest way to destroy any probability of financial fame on Broadway’ because audiences ‘have been trained not to think’. Menotti did not veil his astonishment that some critics had taken him to task for leaving his opera’s issues ‘unresolved’. That was hardly unprecedented, he noted, drawing examples from classical Greek and Shakespearean drama. ‘What does ‘Hamlet’ teach us,’ he asked rhetorically, ‘except to ask ourselves the very questions that Hamlet fails splendidly to answer?’ His most recent opera was written in a similar vein. ‘No one in *The Saint of Bleeker Street* is punished or rewarded,’ Menotti insisted dubiously. ‘They simply meet their destinies’ (Menotti 1955: X1, X3). Not surprisingly, he thus refrained from commenting directly on the authenticity of visions and the stigmata or the efficacy of ostensibly miraculous healing faith. These matters are lodged ambiguously in the minds of the audience.

Conclusion

As the historiography of Western music as well as that of modern Catholicism (especially within ethnic groups) progresses, one can hope that works like *The Saint of Bleeker Street* will receive significantly greater attention than has hitherto been the case. The phenomenon of stigmata, which continues to fascinate some observers, may well continue to be exploited in the creative arts. Its role in Menotti’s opera of 1954 is obviously part of the history of popular reactions to such purported occurrences as those ascribed to Padre Pio

and Therese Neumann. What has been demonstrated in the present article, however, is the deeper, underlying issue of faith and doubt in a modern ethnic setting. The 1950s have often been regarded, at least in a quantitative sense, as the apogee of popular religious life in American society. In Roman Catholicism that decade is popularly remembered as the last hurrah for heavyweight traditional religion before the *risorgimento* of the Second Vatican Council brought about a general loosening of ecclesiastical hegemony over popular religious life and, secondarily, a gradual exodus from the church as a significant portion of the once captive flock flew the coop. A close consideration of Menotti's presentation of the theme of faith *versus* scepticism helps to illuminate dimensions of the fluctuations of popular piety nearly a decade before Pope John XXIII called the bishops to the Vatican at a turning point in the history of Catholicism.

Yet we have argued that in *The Saint of Bleeker Street* the larger issue, of which the quarrel about the stigmata forms only a focal point, is the ongoing confrontation of intensive religious faith and strident scepticism. Some reviewers, such as Wyatt, took Menotti to task for not resolving this tension or even offering a partial answer to it. To this composer of two minds, however, who was no longer in the grasp of the Roman Catholic Church, that alleged weakness was a strength. Less conspicuously, but hardly less powerfully, the ability and desire of Annina to minister to people around her belongs to this greater matter, and long before the curtain falls the question of the stigmata has faded.

By raising questions that continue to be asked in culture after culture, not least those in which Christianity has been the dominant religion, rather than providing facile answers helps to lend *The Saint of Bleeker Street* continued currency. That it is a musically rich work also contributes to its appeal. Scholarly inquiry into Menotti's works is still in its infancy and lags far behind the popularity of his extensive *oeuvre* in general. It is hardly too much to suggest that theologians as well as historians of international Western culture will find much paydirt yet to be mined in this piece. Not that research into religious dimensions of popular culture is new; for many decades scholars in several disciplines, including religious studies, have broadened the parameters of their fields by examining how questions of spirituality have been exploited in works intended for the masses. After all, most people confront such issues at that level, not at loftier intellectual altitudes. Scholarship can hope to benefit from the continued broadening and deepening of such research.

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