

Gian Carlo Menotti's delightful "Madrigal Fable" *The Unicorn, the Gorgon and the Manticore* (or Three Sundays of a Poet) is nearly thirty years old, but remains one of the more original choral works of the twentieth century. The unique combination of the choral and dance mediums, which gives it its charm and freshness, may be the stumbling block for conductors wishing to mount a production. The conductor is given few instructions in the score. Menotti lists only the cast of characters, the definitions of the Unicorn, the Gorgon, and the Manticore from "The Book of Beasts" and one small production note concerning the imitations of the monsters.¹ Time and place are left to the imagination, and the dramatic action is inferred from the text and the titles of the instrumental interludes. This article is an attempt to identify the problems of production and to offer possible solutions to the choral director.

Most likely the choral director will not find himself in a situation where he is approached by another organization or persons to assist in a production of the *Unicorn*. If the work is to be performed, it is likely that the initial idea or desire, and much of the ground work, will originate with the choral director. It is safe to assume he will serve either officially or unofficially as a general artistic director, responsible for coordination of the entire production. This added responsibility and work may discourage some conductors but entice others. Those who take the challenge will find a *Unicorn* production richly rewarding for everyone involved.

The work does not fit into a neatly defined genre. Scored for chorus, nine instrumentalists and ten dancers, it has been called everything from chamber opera to ballet. Menotti's inspiration came from the late Renaissance madrigal comedies of Orazio Vecchi, in particular *L'Amfiparnaso*. While there is some semblance of plot and a loose dramatic connection in Vecchi's madrigals, it is doubtful that he intended his work to be staged. In the prologue, the young lover, Lelio, instructs the audience to listen as the "spectacle . . . is beheld by the imagination."² To the old madrigal

Menotti's Medieval Menagerie Producing *The Unicorn, the Gorgon and the Manticore*

by John Hopkins

comedy form Menotti added instrumental interludes and a well developed dramatic plot to create a genre of its own.

Commissioned by the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation, the *Unicorn* received its first performance at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., on October 21, 1956. It was an immediate success. The *Unicorn* represented both a change of compositional style for Menotti and a return to smaller works. The *Newsweek* review of the first performance quoted Menotti's reasons for the change as simple and practical. "I have become more interested in works that can be given in schools, or by small ensembles."³

The pieces of the production "puzzle" will fit together slowly at first. The director must find dancers, choreographer, production staff and a performance space, not to mention funding. The *Unicorn* is well suited for a college or university whose structure automatically provides personnel and facilities through an ideal collaboration of the music, drama, and dance departments. Other likely collaborators could include local dance studios or ensembles, chamber orchestras, and drama organizations. The advantages of collaborating with specific organizations, rather than many individuals, are obvious.

It is imperative that the director assemble a qualified and dependable production staff, not only to insure artistic quality, but also to keep the production moving as smoothly as possible. There is nothing innovative concerning the structure or the responsibilities of the production staff suggested here. Their descriptions are presented for the benefit of those conductors not familiar with the structure and what they should expect from the collaborators. The size of the production staff will depend on the size and scope of the entire production. Sub-

divisions of these positions may be necessary, but the recruitment of personnel needed for these divisions would remain the responsibility of the original staff member.

First and foremost you will need a choreographer who will be responsible for the visual aspects of the performance. This will be your most important selection, and once chosen, the choreographer may be very helpful in selecting the other staff members. The director may approach a dance organization directly, enlisting its collaboration on the project and allowing the selection of the choreographer to be made within the organization or school department. It may be more desirable and efficient to select the choreographer first, allowing that person to present the project directly to the organization. The choreographer will be able to accurately assess the demands and rewards of the collaboration and therefore, will be able to present a solid and convincing proposal to the organization.

The director who selects his choreographer should observe the work of prospective choreographers before making his decision. It is also advisable to observe works in a variety of styles, looking for consistency in quality that would indicate the versatility of the choreographer. A choreographer who is sensitive to the use of mixed meters and can translate the innate humor and drama of the music into dance and mime will obviously be your best choice.

Supporting the choreographer, you will need a costume designer and a set/lighting designer. These people must work together as a team, designing and constructing the visual "picture." The designers should be selected in consultation with the choreographer, who may be able to recommend people for these positions.

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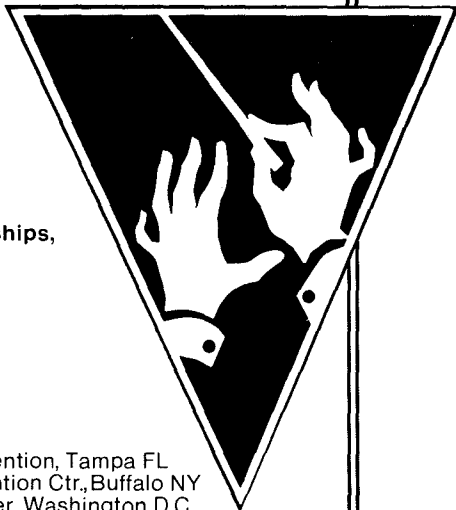
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Costuming a dance work may be quite different from costuming a standard period piece for theater. The costume designer may need to modify or stylize designs to allow freedom of movement. The costumes must be built strong enough to withstand strenuous movement. The choreographer must be aware of movement restrictions imposed by the designs of the costumes, and of any changes in design that could affect the choreographic plan. Dancers will need costumes well in advance of the performance to learn to move in them.

The responsibilities of the set/lighting designer may vary with the performance area and the type of production planned. The *Unicorn* can be successfully staged with little or no scenery. Depending on the facilities used, the designer's main concern may be constructing a suitable dance surface.

With this core group, the actual production can begin. The production staff has been selected and their artistic ideas have been formulated. Now cost estimates must be made. In establishing a production budget, it must be determined what expenses will be covered with available funds, and if other means of raising money, such as grant requests, will be necessary. A great deal of organization needs to have taken place by the time a director approaches organizations or agencies for funding.

Assuming funding has been secured and the production has the "green light," the core production staff will engage other necessary artists and personnel. Work on publicity, including posters, programs, tickets, etc., should begin immediately. Printers often need considerable lead time, and deadlines can come surprisingly early.

It is highly recommended that the director include a production manager in the core group. This person will serve as staff liaison and will be responsible for meeting production deadlines, keeping the entire production on schedule. The director will need someone in this position if he is to keep himself free to attend to the musical preparation. A word of warning: select this person with care, as he must be organized, not easily intimidated and cool if the panic button is pushed, or his posi-

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tion will degenerate to nothing more than a glorified errand boy.

At this time it may be necessary to emphasize an all-important point. The lines of communication must be kept open among your staff. Any changes or additions to the original plan must be common knowledge. Needs and limitations must be clearly understood. Regular production staff meetings must be held to keep members informed of progress, recent developments or changes and to serve as problem solving sessions. Weekly meetings are not excessive, even if all aspects are progressing on schedule. Allow the production manager to preside over these meetings. It will help establish his position of authority and relieve the director of additional responsibility.

Now that the structure of the production staff has been established, it is necessary to address problems encountered in the artistic design of the production. It is helpful to examine previous productions, especially those involving Menotti himself. Lyndal Grieb's bibliography is a most valuable resource for locating reviews and other references to these productions.⁴ At this point the author will take the liberty of inserting personal notes from the production of the *Unicorn* staged at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks (UAF). They are presented here as suggestive illustrations, and in no way should they be interpreted as "definitive" solutions.

It is important to choose the stage or performance area where the *Unicorn* is to be performed as soon as possible; this choice will affect all subsequent artistic decisions. When it is determined where the choir and instrumentalists will be positioned, and what area will be used by the dancers, the choreographer and set designer may begin their work.

Historically, productions of the *Unicorn* have varied greatly in size and scope, and interestingly, Menotti has supervised productions at both extremes. The first two performances of the work are good examples. The first performance at the Library of Congress was quite small. The chorus and instrumentalists performed in the orchestra pit, and the dancers, in full possession of the stage, performed with no sets or backdrops. Lighting was limited to a few spotlights. Subsequently, the

New York City Ballet mounted a production with the same choreographer, John Butler. This performance incorporated the use of full sets and lighting, with the choir, dressed in gray, standing on stage right. Other productions have placed the choir and instrumentalists in various positions on and off stage. In retrospect, there is much support for the idea the *Unicorn* is better suited to a chamber setting. In fact, Menotti preferred the original production in Washington to the larger New York production, which he stated "...lost some of its charm."⁵ The fact that the work successfully survives productions of varying size is testament to the durability and versatility of the piece.

Allowing the dancers to use the stage and placing the musicians in the orchestra pit may be more pleasing visually, but may produce problems for the conductor. With the choir in the orchestra pit, the diction of the singers may become veiled. As a result, it becomes difficult for the audience to follow the story line and deprives them of the full effect of Menotti's skillful text settings. If the height of the pit floor is adjustable, the director may wish to raise the pit high enough to bring the heads of the singers into full view, allowing for more direct projection. This solution, however, may cause problems if sight lines become obstructed.

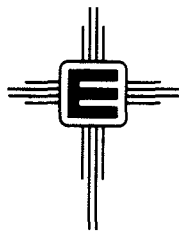
Keeping the choir on stage, on either side or center upstage, appears to be the most favorable setup for musical reasons. Such positionings also help preserve the chamber flavor of the work. The choice can then be made either to incorporate

the choir into the "picture" with some sort of costume, or simply to use concert dress. If keeping the choir on stage in formation is considered visually unacceptable, the problem could theoretically be solved by dressing the members as townspeople and choreographing them into the action. This would require a very large costume budget and ample rehearsal time for the group to memorize the music and be blocked into the action.

The UAF production placed the choir and orchestra center upstage for accoustical reasons, with dancers working on both sides of the stage and in front of the choir. Center downstage was extended by constructing a small platform, approached by two ramps from the seating level. This extension allowed action to take place on floor level (e.g. the "March to the Castle") and the varying levels of the ramps. The choir and orchestra were dressed in gray monk robes, to provide as neutral a background for the dancers as was possible.

It is suggested that the director and his staff examine the possibility of using a studio theater or theater-in-the-round setup as an alternative to the traditional proscenium theater. This would certainly keep the production small and preserve the intimate chamber appeal of the work. In this arrangement the audience would surround the stage. The choir and orchestra can occupy one segment of the circle, or one side of a square configuration, and the stage area can be reserved for the dancers.

Once the logistical problems have been solved and the location of the choir, instrumentalists, and dance



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area is established, the set designer begins his work. If the choir and orchestra are in the pit and the designer has the full stage at his disposal, it would seem that he would be limited only by his imagination and budget. When all involved are on stage, an effective functional design is much more difficult to execute. The dance area will be much smaller and set pieces can prove too restrictive for the choreographer. In this case, less is more, and a clever lighting design can be more effective. If the budget

is restricted, it is much better to invest in costumes than sets.

No sets were used in the UAF production for very practical reasons. The performance took place in the concert hall which is in constant use for other rehearsals, classes, concerts, and even movies. It would have been impossible to move sets offstage, as there was no place to store them when other activities were scheduled. Instead, multi-colored heraldry banners made from felt were hung around the proscenium, effectively creating a

festive medieval atmosphere while leaving the stage unencumbered.

Although the *Unicorn* is patterned after the Renaissance madrigal plays, the story appears to take place during medieval times. Menotti does not indicate any date or geographical area for the story, only an implied "Once upon a time . . ." It is important to establish the approximate era if costumes and sets are to be cohesive.

The UAF production was set in mid-fourteenth century in Middle-Gothic style. The choreographer and costume designers preferred this time period for practical reasons. Not only were these gothic designs simpler and cheaper to construct, but the open-sided gowns allowed the dancers more freedom of movement.⁶ The choreographer was particularly attracted to the unicorn and bicorn hennin (long pointed hats with scarves attached) which were worn by the women of the time.

Before continuing the discussion of costumes, let us look at the cast of characters. Menotti lists ten in the score: the Man in the Castle (the poet), the Count, the Countess, Doctor and Mayor and their wives, the Unicorn, the Gorgon, and the Manticore. In this basic cast the only monsters present are those in possession of the Man in the Castle. Menotti suggests that the monsters that are owned by the townsfolk should be lifeless copies of the three monsters. He notes that the "imitation of the three monsters, as sported by the townsfolk, may be lifeless and be symbolized, for example, by glove-like puppets."⁷ The cast of ten is minimal and can be easily expanded to include three monsters for each townsfolk couple, additional townsfolk, and children as needed.

The choreographer's decisions on casting will obviously be influenced by the number and calibre of dancers available. The allegorical importance of the monsters in the story must be evident in the casting and the costume design. The Unicorn represents the poet's youth, the Gorgon his manhood, and the Manticore his old age.⁸ The roles of the Man in the Castle and the three primary beasts should be cast with your best dancers. The countess should also be a good actress.

If the abilities of your dancers are unequal, and/or you are faced with

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the not uncommon problem of too few male dancers, there are acceptable alternatives. The roles of the townsfolk may be cast with actors who move well on stage, keeping their choreography rudimentary and developing their dramatic characters. Actors with strong mime skills are a wise choice, as their characters' conversations comprise a great deal of the text sung by the choir. Using actors in the townsfolk roles may allow more characterizing of roles (i.e. a portly mayor, an aging doctor or a stuffy, pompous count), and, in fact, underscore the disparity between the townsfolk and the mystical Man of the Castle and his beasts, whose roles would be danced.

If the cast is expanded to include the lesser beasts, they can be danced by a single trio with fast costume changes, keeping the number of dancers to a minimum. A large number of younger dancers was available in the dance company which collaborated with the UAF production. The decision was made to cast the three trios of lesser beasts with juvenile dancers. Their smaller size proved an advantage, making them appear as "fledgling" monsters, quite adorable housepets for the townsfolk.

As mentioned previously, the first problem with the costume design is to establish the period. Costuming the townsfolk and even the Man in the Castle will then be fairly straightforward. However, creating the mythological creatures can be challenging and problematic for the designer. Everyone has some idea what unicorns were to have looked like, but gorgons and manticores are another matter. With a little research into the mythological history of these beasts and a lot of imagination, the monsters will be properly terrifying and become the focal point of the production.

This focus was captured in the UAF production by the use of oversized head masks for the three major beasts. Two practical considerations were of prime concern in their design—weight and balance. The design and construction of the masks were executed by a fiber artist who chose to construct the frames from reed, which, after soaking, can be bent in most any shape and is very lightweight. These frames were covered with a variety of fabrics and other materials to

build the faces. The masks were scheduled to be completed three weeks before the performance in order to allow the dancers ample time to become accustomed to them.


Incorporated into the design of each beast was the association of a specific color: white for the Unicorn (which was muted to light gray for visual reasons), dark green for the gorgon, and dark red for the manticores. The costume for each beast was completed primarily with a leotard of the respective color, allowing the highly stylized oversized masks to dominate the design. There was no attempt to recreate the masks for the lesser beasts, but the respective colors of the beasts were carried through their costume designs. We discussed the possibility of giving each of the lesser beasts a prop, such as a two-dimensional copy of the major beast's mask mounted on a stick, which was to be surrendered after its entrance to its respective couple,


symbolizing ownership. The beasts would then be free to dance unnumbered. Although we did not follow through with the concept, it presents a simple and interesting solution that is worth mentioning.

For the musical director there are a few notes concerning matters which might not be immediately apparent. The choreographer will need a rehearsal recording. A commercial recording can be used, allowing dancers to become familiar with text and orchestration.⁹ Tempos, however, may be different from those taken by the musical director. Most likely, this recording will be needed before the choir and instrumentalists know the work well enough to make a satisfactory rehearsal tape. A piano tape may be needed. It is important that tempos are established early for the benefit of the choreographer and the dancers. Drastic changes of tempo would most likely result in the dances having to be rechoreographed.

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There is one feature which makes the *Unicorn* easier to produce than many other works composed for a combination of media. The groups involved in the production can rehearse effectively separately and be brought together for a few final rehearsals. The dancers can work with rehearsal tapes and recordings. Most of the choral work is a cappella, the instruments joining the chorus only in the "Eighth Madrigal" and the "March to the Castle." The interludes provide the bulk of the orchestral work. The "Third Madrigal" is scored for solo

women's trio, whose a cappella phrases are separated with instrumental interjections. It may be advantageous to have the trio attend an orchestra rehearsal before all groups are called together. Likewise, the dancers and the instrumentalists should rehearse together before being joined by the chorus. This type of careful planning can relieve pressure on final full company rehearsals.

In the initial planning stages the musical director should not forget to make rental arrangements for the score and instrumental parts

through Belwin Mills.¹⁰ The copy of the score I received was very light print and difficult to read under the stage lights. There are a number of dynamic and tempo markings not noted in the piano-reduction score. There were also some errors in the meter changes printed in that score.

Players with good facility are needed for the instrumental parts, as they are quite tricky, especially for the woodwinds. The orchestra should meet fairly early in the production schedule to ascertain how much rehearsal time will be needed.

There are separate choral parts published without the interludes and the piano reductions. Rehearsal time will be saved if the director writes the choral book page numbers of the movements in his score, and choir members number the measures of each piece for quick reference.

It is hoped that this brief production outline may give courage and encouragement to those directors who have not undertaken the challenges of the *Unicorn* because of the production demands. The suggestions presented here are surely not the only ways to solve the problems encountered. Most likely, they will have to be tailored to fit each specific situation. If they help make the job easier, then they have served their purpose.

Notes

¹Gian Carlo Menotti, *The Unicorn, the Gorgon and the Manticore* (New York: Belwin Mills, 1956), p. 4.

²Orazio Vecchi, *L'Amfiparnaso*, ed. Cecil Adkins (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1977), p. 9.

³"So Menotti Beguiles," *Newsweek* 48 (November 5, 1956): 79.

⁴Lyndal Griebs, *The Operas of Gian Carlo Menotti, 1937-1972: A Selective Bibliography* (Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, 1974).

⁵John Gruen, *Menotti*, (New York: Macmillan, 1978), p. 125.

⁶Illustrations and pattern cuts of some Middle-Gothic costumes can be found in: Margot Hamilton Hill, *The Evolution of Fashion* (New York: Reinhold, 1967), pp. 30-37.

⁷Menotti, *The Unicorn, the Gorgon and the Manticore*, p. 4.

⁸Gruen, 125. Gruen has divided his biography of Menotti into three sections subtitled *The Unicorn*, *The Gorgon*, and *The Manticore*, describing the corresponding phases of Menotti's life.

⁹Recommended recording: Gian Carlo Menotti, *The Unicorn, the Gorgon and the Manticore*, University of Michigan Chamber Choir, Thomas Hilbish, conductor (The University of Michigan Records SM0012).

¹⁰Permissions may be secured from Belwin Mills Publishing Corp.; 1776 Broadway; New York, NY 10019; (212) 245-1100.

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