

The Unicorn, the Gorgon and the Manticore
OR

The Three Sundays of a Poet
A Madrigal Opera in One Act

by Gian Carlo Menotti

Performed by the New Mexico Tech Chamber Choir

Soprano

Luana C. Berger
Claire J. Chandler
Amber Marie Polizzi
Joan E. Stone
Laura Jean Wilcox

Alto

Eileen Comstock
Amy R. Mathis
Karen Schlue
Naomi Davidson

Tenor

Bryan Butler
Jack Cheney
Jon Morrison

Bass

Paul Barrientos
Matthew Hoffman
Curtis Hoier
Michael P. Rupen
John W. Shipman

And

Flute – Jesse Tatum
Clarinet – Alfredo Lopez
Trumpet – Jared Prost
Bass – Robert Taylor

Oboe – Darrel Randall
Bassoon – Karen Crutchfield
Cello – Doug Wilber
Percussion – Greg Farmer

Doug Dunston, Conductor

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This musical piece was commissioned by the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation, in the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., and was first performed under the sponsorship of the Foundation in the Library of Congress (in the Coolidge Auditorium) on 21 October 1956. The New York premiere, presented by the New York City Ballet, took place on 15 January 1957, at the New York City Center of Music and Drama. It was written by Gian Carlo Menotti for chorus and small orchestra, and as a score for a ballet. Here, we perform it without the accompanying dance portion. Gian Carlo Menotti was born in Italy in 1911, and immigrated to the U.S. with his mother at age 17. His relationship with Samuel Barber began soon thereafter and is well chronicled. Amazingly, he is still very active in music, at age 92!



Gian Carlo Menotti in 1955

The Story

The text focuses on a well-to-do but eccentric poet who lives in a castle. It presents his life in three stages: his youth, middle, and old age. Three unusual pets, imagined into being by the poet, symbolize these stages – a unicorn, a gorgon, and a mantichore. As an aside, the behavior of these beasts mimics Menotti's own career, and his idea of artists in general. The unicorn, the young artist, is capricious, foolish, and susceptible to temptation, but beautiful all the while. The gorgon, the artist at mid-life, having achieved some success, is loud, proud, and fearless, ignores the critics, and can be quite ugly. Naturally, in reaching this stage, the unicorn (youth) dies off, or, taken another way, is actually killed off by mankind and its critics, i.e., youthful creativity is worn down by criticism and fickleness. (Note that Menotti had a well-documented constant fight with literary and musical critics. One critic dismissed him as "the Puccini of the poor" to which he countered "Better that than 'the Boulez of the rich' ". He doesn't hide his dislike for critics in this piece, calling them 'critical crickets', and 'sententious cows'.) The mantichore, the aging artist, is lonely (payment for his haughty behavior as the gorgon!), and shy, avoiding contact as much as possible. He regrets his earlier ways, and although he means well, he often hurts those around him, having been embittered by the years of criticism. In passing into old age, the gorgon of middle age dies off, or, again, is killed off by mankind.

In the piece, each appearance of the poet in the town with a new beast sets off a series of events. When he first appears with his unicorn on a Sunday stroll, the astonished townsfolk ascribe this oddity to insanity. Yet the sheer novelty of the unicorn compels at least the Countess to overcome her amazement and persuade the Count to obtain a unicorn for them. The townsfolk soon follow suit, obtaining unicorns of their own. The next Sunday, the strange man appears, this time not with the unicorn, but with the hideous gorgon. This further astonishes the townsfolk who take the unicorn for dead, apparently murdered by the strange man. The arrival of the new creature gives the Countess the opportunity to dispense with her unicorn (it has grown commonplace) and to acquire a gorgon. To follow this new fashion, the townsfolk kill their own unicorns. Not surprisingly, the same set of events takes place when a mantichore appears instead of the gorgon on the man's next Sunday walk. But the subsequent disappearance of the mantichore so scandalizes the townsfolk that they proceed directly to the castle to pass judgement on the strange man. When they arrive, however, they find him on his deathbed, with the three creatures at his side. Deriding all those who blindly live through social conventions, all those who value things blest only by fashion, he finally suggests that only in the artist will society find redemption, for it is the artist who lives by and for truth.

The Bestiary



The Unicorn

A white horse with a long spiral horn jutting out from its forehead. It is associated with purity and virtue and can only be captured by a virgin. Its horn has medical and other powers.



The Gorgon

The gorgons were three sisters, the third of which, Medusa, was mortal. The gorgons were monsters with serpents for hair, brazen claws and staring eyes whose glance turned men to stone. Their wings were of gold, their bodies were covered with impenetrable scales and their teeth were as long as the tusks of wild boars.



The Manticore

A very ferocious beast. One description: "It has a red lion's body; a human face, ears and blue eyes; and a voice like the mingling of panpipes and trumpet. But the distinctive and terrible features are three rows of teeth in each jaw, a fatal sting like a scorpion's in the end of the tail, and poisoned spines along the tail which may be shot like arrows in any direction. Finally, it is a man-eater."

LIBRETTO

INTRODUCTION

There once lived a Man in a Castle,
and a strange man was he.
He shunned the Countess' parties;
he yawned at town meetings;
he would not let the doctor take his pulse;
he did not go to church on Sundays.
Oh what a strange man is the Man in the Castle!

INTERLUDE I

The Dance of the Man in the Castle.

FIRST MADRIGAL

Ev'ry Sunday afternoon,
soft winds fanning the fading sun,
all the respectable folk went out walking slowly on the
pink promenade by the sea.
Proud husbands velvety-plump,
with embroider'd silk-pale ladies.

At four o'clock they all greeted each other;
They spoke ill of each other at six:
Women "How d'you do?" "Very well, thank you."
"Have you heard?" "Pray, do tell me."
"Tcha tcha tcha tcha tcha ra tcha ra tcha..."
"How funny, how amusing, how odd! Ha ha ha ha!"
"How well you look!" "How pretty your dress!"
"Thank you." "Thank you."
"Good-bye." "Good-bye."
"Isn't she a gossip!" "Isn't she a fright!"
Men "How d'you do?" "Very well, thank you."
"What do you think of this and that?"
"In my humble opinion: Bla bla bla bla la la bla..."
"How profound, how clever, how true!
Only you could understand me."
"Thank you." "Thank you."
"Good-bye." "Good-bye."
"Oh, what a pompous ass!" "Oh, what a fool!"

INTERLUDE II

Promenade.

FIRST SUNDAY

SECOND MADRIGAL

(Enter the Man in the Castle and the Unicorn)

One Sunday afternoon the proud Man in the Castle
joined the crowd in the promenade by the sea.
He walked slowly down the quai
leading by a silver chain a captive unicorn.
The townsfolk stopped to stare at the ill-assorted pair.
Thinking the man insane some laughed with pity, some
laughed with scorn:

"What a scandalous sight to see a grown-up man
promenade a unicorn in plain daylight
all through the city"

"If one can stroke the cat and kick the dog;
if one can pluck the peacock and flee the bee;
if one can ride the horse and hook the hog;
if one can tempt the mouse and swat the fly,
Why, why would a man both rich and
well-born raise a unicorn?"

"If one can strike the boar with the spear
and pierce the lark with an arrow;
if one can hunt the fox and the deer,
and net the butterfly and eat the sparrow;
if one can bid the falcon fly and let the robin die;
Why, why would a man both rich and
well-born raise a unicorn?"

"If one can skin the mole and crush the snake;
if one can tame the swan on the lake
and harpoon the dolphin in the sea;
if one can chain the bear and train the flea;
if one can sport with the monkey
and chatter with the magpie,
Why, why would a man both rich and
well-born raise a unicorn?"

THIRD MADRIGAL

(Dance of the Man in the Castle and the Unicorn)

Unicorn, my swift and leaping Unicorn,
keep pace with me, stay close to me,
don't run astray, my gentle rover.
Beware of the virgin sleeping under the lemon tree, her
hair adrift among the clover.
She hides a net under her petticoat,
and silver chains around her hips,
and if you kiss her lips the hidden hunter
will pierce your throat.
Unicorn, beware!
Her crimson lips are hard as coral
and her white thighs are only a snare.
For you who likes to roam, a kiss is poisoned food;

Much sweeter fare is the green laurel; much safer home
is the dark wood.

FOURTH MADRIGAL

(The Count and the Countess)

Count "Why are you sad, my darling?
What shall I buy to make you smile again?
Velvets from Venice, furs from Tatory
or dwarfs from Spain?"

Countess "Why was I ever born?
Ah, my husband dear!
I fear that you cannot afford to calm my sorrow.
Why was I ever born if I must go through life without a
Unicorn! Ah, my master, my lord!"

Count "Ah, dry your tears, my pet, my wife.
Whether I swim or fly, whether I steal or borrow.
I swear that you will own a Unicorn tomorrow."

INTERLUDE III

*As the Count and the Countess appear with a Unicorn,
the townsfolk stare at them in surprise. Soon everyone
in town imitates them until every respectable couple is
seen promenading with its own Unicorn.*

SECOND SUNDAY

FIFTH MADRIGAL

(Enter the Man in the Castle with the Gorgon)

Behold the Gorgon stately and proud.
His eyes transfixed but not unaware of the envious stare
of the common crowd.
Behold the Gorgon tall, big and loud.
He does not see the smiling enemy.
He does not pause to acknowledge the racket of the
critical cricket
nor to confute the know-how of the sententious cow.
He slowly sarabands down the street ignoring the
hunter but mixing with the elite.
Fearless and wild, his wings widespread.
He fascinates the maiden and frightens the child.

SIXTH MADRIGAL

(The Townsfolk and the Man in the Castle)

Townsfolk "And what is that?
A Bloody-Nun, a were-wolf?"
Man "This is a Gorgon."
Townsfolk "And what did you do
with the Unicorn, please?"
Man "He only liked to gambol and tease.
I quickly grew tired of the fun,
so I peppered and grilled him."
Townsfolk "Do you mean?"
Man "Yes, I killed him."
Townsfolk "Oh but the man must be out of his mind."

How ungrateful of him, to wilfully destroy
the pretty Unicorn so gentle and coy,
and had he found something prettier at least,
but look at the Gorgon the horrible beast."
Wicked is Man, Patient is God,
All He gives Man to enjoy Man will destroy.
Banish all sleep, weep for the dead.
Cover my head with a black veil.
Muffle the horn and the lute, silence the nightingale.
For the Unicorn, slain by Man,
will not leap ever again.

SEVENTH MADRIGAL

(The Count and the Countess. The latter has secretly poisoned her Unicorn)

Count "Why are you sad, my darling?
Gone is the swallow from your limpid eyes,
Gone is the silver from your clarion voice."
Countess "Ah, my Unicorn.
Whether he grazed on mandrake or hellebore
or only caught a chill
I very much fear, my Unicorn is done for,
he is so very ill."
Count "Do not grieve, my dear,
once he's dead and gone we shall buy a younger one."
Countess "Ah, my Unicorn,
no younger one can take his place.
Besides they have grown too commonplace.
The Mayor's wife has one, so does the doctor's wife.
Now that my Unicorn is gone I want a Gorgon."
Count "A Gorgon! Ha, God forbid!"
Countess "Ah, you no longer love me.
You must love another.
Ah me, that's clear: I must go back to mother."
Count "Bon voyage, my dear."
Countess "Ah, abandoned and betrayed,
I shall take the veil and die a nun."
Count "Why not an abbess? I couldn't care less."
Countess "Think of our son
who has done no wrong."
Count "The little monster, take him along."
Countess, crying "Ho, ho, Oh! No!
Not that, I pray, not that, I pray!"
Count "Calm yourself, my dear. I shall find a Gorgon
this very day."

INTERLUDE IV

As the Count and the Countess appear at a picnic with a Gorgon, the Townsfolk stare at them in great surprise. Soon all the Unicorns in town are killed and every respectable couple is now seen promenading a Gorgon.

THIRD SUNDAY

EIGHTH MADRIGAL

(Enter the Man in the Castle with the Manticore)

Do not caress the lonely Manticore.
Do not unless your hand is gloved.
Feeling betrayed, feeling unloved,
so lost he is in cabalistic dreams
he often bites the hand he really meant to kiss.
Although he's almost blind and very, very shy
and says he loves mankind.
His glist'ning back whenever tapped
will quickly raise its piercing quills.
How often as if in jest inadvertently he kills
the people he loves best.
Afraid of love he hides in secret lairs
and feeds on herbs more bitter than the aloe.
Fleeing the envious, the curious and the shallow,
he keeps under his pillow
a parchment he thinks contains Solomon's seal
and will restore his sight.
And late at night he battles with the Sphinx.

NINTH MADRIGAL

(The Townsfolk and the Man in the Castle)

Townsfolk "And who is that?
Methuselah or Beelzebub?"
Man "This is the Manticore."
Townsfolk "And what of the Gorgon?
How is he these days?"
Man "He was so proud and pompous and loud
I quickly grew tired of his ways.
First I warned him and then I caged him.
Fin'ly he died."
Townsfolk "He died? of what?"
Man "Of murder."
Townsfolk "Oh, but the man must be out of his mind.
How ungrateful of him, to slaughter in a cage
the gorgeous Gorgon, the pride of his age.
Had he found something prettier at least,
but this Manticore is a horrible beast."

INTERLUDE V

The Countess secretly stabs her Gorgon.

TENTH MADRIGAL

(The Count and the Countess)

Count "Why are you sad, my darling?"
Countess "Why are you sad, my darling?
I like that, I like that!
Are you drunk, are you asleep, or just blind?"
Count "I must be all three for I dreamt
you were charming and kind."
Countess "I dare say, with the exception of you,

the whole town is aware of my terrible plight.
 My Gorgon is lost, my Gorgon,
 my Gorgon is hopelessly lost!"
Count "Hardly a reason to weep.
 I can now get you a dozen at half his original price."
Countess "How dare you suggest such a thing.
 You have no intuition or sense,
 you are vulgar and dense."
Count "I bow to your eloquence,
 but what have I said?"
Countess "Do you expect me to keep and pamper
 and feed a breed that is common and cheap?"
Count "I shall say no more."
Countess "Not even to offer me a Manticore."
Count "A Manticore? That ghost, that golem,
 that ghoul in my house! Never!"
Countess "You are a fool!"
Count "I married you!"
Countess "You are a mule!"
Count "You are a shrew!"
Countess "How dare you, Oh, I faint."
Count "(Oh what a wife have I,
 Medusa she is and Xantippe,
 still she must share my bed, I wish I were dead.)"
Countess "Saying something?"
Count "Oh nothing."
Countess "May I then have my Manticore?"
Count "Don't be a bore."
Countess "Oh, why did I marry a count of no account,
 since I could have married a duke or a prince."
Count "(Because they were clever and I was a fool.)"
Countess "Saying something?"
Count "Oh nothing!"
Countess "I heard you." *she slaps him*
Count "(Oh what a wife have I,
 Medusa she is and Xantippe,
 Oh what a wife have I, I wish she would die.)"
Countess "Do you still refuse?"
Count "You are much too convincing
 and forceful and deft."
Countess "I knew we would finally see eye to eye."
Count "Yes, the one eye I have left."

INTERLUDE VI

As the Count and the Countess appear with the Manticore, the Townsfolk stare at them in great surprise. Soon all the Gorgons in town are killed and every respectable couple is now seen promenading a Manticore.

Program by: Bryan Butler

ELEVENTH MADRIGAL

(The Townsfolk)

Have you noticed the Man in the Castle is seen no more
 Walking on Sundays his Manticore.
 I have a suspicion. Do you suppose? Do you?
 The Manticore too?
 We must form a committee to stop all these crimes.
 We should arrest him, we should splice his tongue
 and triturate his bones.
 He should be tortured with water and fire,
 with pulleys and stones
 (He should be put on the rack,
 on the wheel, on the stake.)
 in molten lead, in the Iron Maiden.
 Let us all go to explore the inner courts of the Castle
 and find out what he has done with the rare Manticore.

THE MARCH TO THE, CASTLE

Slow, much too slow, is the judgement of God.
 Quick is the thief.
 Speedy architect of perfect labyrinths the sinner.
 But God's law works in time and time has one flaw:
 it is unfashionably slow.
 We, the few, the elect, must take things in our hands.
 We must judge those who live
 and condemn those who love.
 All passion is uncivil. All candor is suspect.
 We detest all, except, what by fashion is blest.
 And forever and ever, whether evil or good,
 we shall respect what seems clever.

TWELFTH MADRIGAL

(The Man in the Castle on his death-bed, surrounded by the Unicorn, the Gorgon, and the Manticore.)

Oh foolish people who feign to feel
 what other men have suffered.
 You, not I, are the indifferent killers
 of the poet's dreams.
 How could I destroy
 the pain wrought children of my fancy?
 What would my life have been
 without their faithful and harmonious company?
 Unicorn, My youthful foolish Unicorn,
 please do not hide, come close to me.
 And you, my Gorgon, behind whose splendor
 I hid the doubts of my midday, you, too, stand by.
 And here is my shy and lonely Manticore,
 who gracefully leads me to my grave.
 Farewell. Equally well I loved you all.
 Although the world may not suspect it,
 all remains intact within the Poet's heart.
 Farewell. Not even death I fear as in your arms I die.
 Farewell.