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Budding opera star makes his big stage debut

Andrew White, 12, is ready to perform lead in the classic *Amahl and the Night Visitors*

By TARA DOOLEY Copyright 2011 Houston Chronicle
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James Nielsen Chronicle

Amahl and the Night Visitors, a famous opera written for television, is about a young boy and the three kings who come to the manger to visit Jesus after his birth.

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AM AHL AND THE NIGHT VISITORS

Andrew White makes his River Oaks Chamber Orchestra debut in the title role of this opera by Gian Carlo Menotti.

From the first note, it will be clear if the change has come.

It's a high G, that heralds Andrew White's entrance as **Amahl** in the **River Oaks Chamber Orchestra's** production of *Amahl and the Night Visitors*.

In years gone by, there would be no concern as the Jan. 6 date of Andrew's opera debut neared.

But Andrew is now 12 and in the seventh grade, just about the age when a boy's voice changes and a young soprano can take an abrupt turn for the adult.

"That will not happen until Jan. 7," his mother, Karen White joked. Sort of.

With a week until showtime, most fears were calmed that Andrew would stay a soprano long enough to carry the title role in the opera about the **Adoration of the Magi**. After all, his brothers' voices didn't change until spring of seventh grade, Andrew said.

That means that Andrew and the cast can sing **Gian Carlo Menotti's** tale about a young crippled boy and his destitute mother who interact with the **three kings** on their way to pay homage to the infant Jesus. The River Oaks Chamber Orchestra and soloists are performing the work twice Thursday, on the **Feast of the Epiphany**, or Three Kings Day. The performance is at the Church of **St. John the Divine** in River Oaks.

The 45-minute opera was created for television in 1951 and premiered live on NBC. The composer wrote the Amahl part for a **boy soprano**, though many girls have sung the role through the years. The opera has become a beloved favorite in the Christmas season.

"It's very accessible," said the chamber orchestra's executive director Alecia Lawyer. "It's humorous, light, but with very clever writing."

Casting the role of Amahl with a boy soprano was important to Lawyer, who once sang the role as a child. But it was no easy task.

"The challenge of picking an Amahl is you have to find a kid who is mature enough to handle the part but is still singing soprano," she said.

• **What:** *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, a 45-minute opera that tells the story of the Epiphany through the tale of a young cripple boy and his destitute mother who encounter the three kings on their way to see the baby Jesus

• **Who:** The River Oaks Chamber Orchestra with Andrew White with soloists including baritone Timothy Jones

• **When:** 6 and 8 p.m. Thursday. A "light bites" reception at 7 p.m. between the performances

• **Where:** The Church of St. John the Divine, 2450 River Oaks Blvd.

• **Tickets:** \$10-\$20. Children younger than 5, free

• **Info:** www.roco.houston.org or 713-665-2700

To find her singer, Lawyer contacted local children's choirs including the Houston Children's Chorus, a group Andrew joined about four years ago. The auditions were held last summer.

Casting a boy soprano as Amahl is always a nail-biter, said Stephen Roddy, founder and director of the multiple groups that make up the Houston Children's Chorus.

"It is the typical panic of anybody doing *Amahl and the Night Visitors*," said Roddy, who has directed his share of productions of the operetta.

The rub is that a young boy's soprano often peaks right before his voice changes.

"As a choral director, I can tell you that their most beautiful voice happens right before it changes," Roddy said. "Andrew's voice is at its most beautiful."

When Andrew auditioned, Lawyer said she was impressed with his "beautiful, high, natural voice," she said. She was also surprised that he already had the part memorized by the time of the audition.

"I didn't expect that," she said.

Well, mostly memorized, according to Andrew.

"It wasn't quite perfect," he said.

Andrew, who is home schooled, began singing in the second grade with a choir associated with the Homewood Christian Association in The Woodlands, where he lives.

"I loved it, it's just good to sing and there are a lot of great people to be around," Andrew said.

Scheduling conflicts meant he had to leave behind that choir. Rather than stop, he auditioned for and was accepted to the Houston Children's Chorus, a group of singers in grades 2 through 8.

Though Amahl is Andrew's first opera, he's already participated in some memorable concerts and even performed in [Carnegie Hall](#).

"The hall has amazing acoustics," he said. "You don't want to mess up in there."

In addition, Andrew started taking piano lessons at age 5 and studies with Robert Moeling at the [Shepherd School of Music's](#) Preparatory Program. He figures he spends about three hours a day practicing piano and an hour singing. His other passion is fencing, which keeps him busy about three days a week.

One of his favorite things about music is performing. He likes the excitement of it.

"The adrenaline rush is good," he said. "That's always fun. But it's the music. The music is good."

When it comes to his opera debut, Andrew is not worried about his voice changing, even if some adults might be.

On the day of the performance he plans to "just relax and let it flow out," he said. "What happens, happens."

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