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## World-class tenor stops in at Canandaigua

**John Pitcher**  
Staff music critic

(August 23, 2006) — On St. Patrick's Day in 2000, tenor **Robert White** had just finished singing "Danny Boy" at the White House when he was suddenly summoned back to the stage. It was Bill Clinton's last St. Patrick's Day in the executive mansion, and the president was in one of his increasingly misty and melancholy moods.

"He said I'm probably the only other guy in this room who knows all the words to that song, and he asked to sing it with me," says White. "And you know what, the devil can also sing. Clinton had a very pleasant baritone."

For White, who performs Schumann's *Dichterliebe* Friday at the **Canandaigua** Lake Chamber Music Festival, singing a duet with the president was almost like another day at the office.

Over the years he has performed for five presidents (starting with Kennedy), Britain's Queen Mother, Prince Charles, Monaco's royal family and Pope John Paul II, among others. His meeting with the Queen Mother was especially sweet and memorable.

She asked him after a 1984 London performance whether he knew the popular Hermann Loehr song "Little Grey Home in the West." When he replied that he both knew and loved it, she grabbed his hands — and sang the song for him.

Like any Irishman worthy of his Guinness — White has dual American and Irish citizenships and says this is an excellent time to travel abroad with an Irish passport — White knows how to tell a good story. And one of his favorites could be a script from *The Twilight Zone*.

On Nov. 22, 1963, White was with composer Gian Carlo Menotti, who had just cast the then 25-year-old tenor in his opera *The Labyrinth*. White sang the role of a 90-year-old man in a wheelchair, and he was with the composer when he learned President Kennedy had been assassinated.

Nearly 38 years later, White went to Scotland to visit Menotti. By that time, Menotti himself was a 90-year-old man in a wheelchair. And the date of that visit was — Sept. 11, 2001. What were the odds?

"A hundred billion billion," says White.

No doubt about it: White has always had an interesting life.

The son of a popular 1920s radio singer, White learned to sing at 6 and by age 9 was performing on *The Fred Allen Show* with such stars as Bing Crosby, Shirley Booth and Humphrey Bogart.

He studied with Sergius Kagen and Beverley Johnson at Juilliard, and then with the legendary Nadia Boulanger in Paris. His career highlights have included singing Handel's *St. John Passion* with Leonard Bernstein at Carnegie Hall, performing the lead in Hindemith's opera *The Long Christmas Dinner* with the composer conducting, and singing on BBC-TV accompanied by flutist James Galway and the Royal Philharmonic.

Now, he divides his time between performing and teaching at Juilliard.

For his recital in **Canandaigua**, White will sing one of the great song cycles, Schumann's *Dichterliebe*, based on 16 poems of anguish and unrequited love by Heinrich Heine.

"This is supremely beautiful music," says White. "And it's a joy to sing. The words fall right off the tongue."

**John Pitcher** has been the classical music critic for the *Democrat and Chronicle* since 2001. His favorite dead-white-guy composer is Brahms; his favorite living one is George Crumb. He enjoys reading Melville and Pynchon, eating insanely hot vindaloo, cheering for the Washington Redskins and spending time with his wife Jenny, sons Jonah and Austin and dog Oliver. He plays piano and is a graduate of Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. Over the years, his views and reviews have appeared in *The Washington Post*, *Symphony Magazine* and *The Newark Star-Ledger*, among other publications. He has also been an on-air critic at National Public Radio, where he occasionally rode the elevator with Susan Stamberg and Terry Gross (they were going up, and Pitcher was going down).



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Tenor **Robert White** sang "Danny Boy" with Bill Clinton. He'll sing Schumann's "Dichterliebe" at **Canandaigua** Lake Chamber Music Festival on August 25.  
[Day in Photos](#)

### If you go

**What:** Tenor **Robert White** and pianist Norman Carey perform Schumann's *Dichterliebe*.  
**When:** 7:30 p.m. Friday.  
**Where:** **Canandaigua** Baptist Church, 5026 North Road, **Canandaigua**.  
**Tickets:** \$22 (\$17 seniors and full-time students).  
**Call:** (800) 838-3006.  
**Web:** [www.lakechambermusic.org](http://www.lakechambermusic.org).

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