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## DAVID TAMKIN: *THE DYBBUK*

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*Kol l'kha bi m'daber b'ahava. Hayinu l'eḥad b'maḥashava.*

(In me your voice speaks, love wrought. We have become one in thought.)

— Tuvia Rivner

*Sic habeto, non esse te mortalem, sed corpus hoc . . . sed mens cuiusque is est quisque.*

(Be sure that it is not you that is mortal, but only your body . . . the spirit is the true self.)

— Cicero

What was omitted from a story outweighs what was left in.

— Ernest Hemingway

The Ukrainian-born émigré composer David Tamkin (1906–1975), a highly successful and prolific Hollywood film scorer, arranger and orchestrator who also wrote a significant amount of classically oriented music and had a particular interest in opera, was struck instantly by operatic possibilities of *The Dybbuk* when, as a young man, he attended a performance of the play in New York.<sup>1</sup>

It was not until 1931, however, that, together with his brother Alex as the librettist, he began work on the opera. They decided from the outset on an opera in English.

In an introduction to his type draft of the libretto, Alex Tamkin provided a prefatory brief in which he explained that the opera “as a whole” is really not so much an opera per se as “drama heightened by the metaphysics of music.” Indeed, the program booklet for the world premiere in 1951 labeled it a “Music-Drama in Three Acts.”

For Alex Tamkin, the original play contained a “singing ecstasy of prose, an atmosphere physical and spiritual, tangible and mystic, and a surge of movement so vigorous that the libretto evolved with little difficulty.” For both brothers, the conception of the opera involved an understanding that (a) “a libretto cannot be reduced to the level of mere intellectual artifice—it must go further and satisfy a human desire for illusion”; and (b) “the opera must contain the impulse of heightened feeling hastening to the point of the idea with as little impediment as possible.” Alex noted that Voltaire’s indictment of musical drama can, possibly, be assuaged in this work to the extent that “no situation was manipulated to render a sonorous lyric while the action stopped for a seemingly interminable breath pause. A ruthless drive for mobile perpetuum was the fundamental credo.”

The opera’s modifications of the play begin as the curtain rises on Act I. Whereas An-Ski called for the interior of the synagogue to show various people in it—Henekh engrossed in a book, other yeshiva students sitting around a table and singing, Meyer the *shames* at work sorting things, the Messenger, the *batlonim* also singing (“*Makhmes vos . . .*”), and Khonon—the Tamkins specified that the occupants of the stage are not (yet) to be revealed upon the curtain

rising. “The audience must immediately be instilled with the illusion,” wrote Alex Tamkin, “which is carried out by the characters who are chanting (vocally learning) passages of the Talmud, sorting, reclining, swaying their bodies—not seen, not heard.” As the Messenger then concludes the “*Mipnei ma?*” song (viz., “*Makhmes vos*”) in an English translation, the “chorus mysticus” responds from offstage with praise of God.<sup>2</sup> And as the *shames*, now recognizable, begins lighting the candles, everything is “at once obvious and audible: the play [music-drama] has begun.”

Condensing the four acts of the play into three presented a bit of a challenge, necessarily deleting piecemeal what Alex called “choice morsels” that he acknowledged were essential to the drama but “aggravatingly fatiguing” to its operatic guise. Considering both prose and poetry to be the “rightful offsprings of music,” the Tamkins had “few scruples in smelting them both down to a rhythmic prose pattern absolutely compatible with the tempo of the music.” Still, preserving the poetry of the play in the sense not only of its pervading mysticism, but even the “authentic quaintness” of its village simplicity—and yet its vigor—was no small task.

### DRAMATIS PERSONAE

KHONON [Hanon].....	Tenor
LEAH.....	Soprano
THE MESSENGER.....	Baritone
RABBI AZRIEL [Reb Ezriel] .....	Baritone
MEYER, <i>THE SHAMES</i> .....	Bass-Baritone
SENDER.....	Bass
HENEKH .....	Baritone
FRADE.....	Contralto
ELDERLY WOMAN.....	Contralto
GITTEL .....	Soprano
BASSIA.....	Mezzo-Soprano
FIRST <i>BATLAN</i> [ <i>batlen</i> ] .....	Tenor
SECOND <i>BATLAN</i> [ <i>batlen</i> ].....	Baritone
THIRD <i>BATLAN</i> [ <i>batlen</i> ] .....	Tenor
MENASHE.....	Tenor
RABBI MENDEL.....	Tenor
ASHER.....	Tenor
MIKHOYL [Mikh].....	Baritone
FIRST HASID.....	Tenor
SECOND HASID.....	Tenor
THIRD HASID.....	Baritone

A WEDDING GUEST ..... Tenor  
 RABBI SHMELKE  
 THE OLD WOMAN ..... Soprano  
 NAKHMAN  
 Chorus of beggars, dancers, “ballet of beggars,” additional yeshiva students.

Much of one *batlen’s* lengthy discourse about famous wonder-working Hassidic *rebbe*s, *tzaddikim* and “miracle workers” is abbreviated through the use of pantomimic figures who appear while he is speaking. This was experimental in terms not only of shortening the conversation among the *batlonim* but also of intensifying the action in that scene beyond verbal or sung description on their own. And, from the reviews, it appears to have worked.

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The poignant scene in which the elderly woman enters the synagogue with her grandchildren to stand in front of the Torah scrolls and plead with God to intervene to save her daughter is musically indicative of Tamkin’s operatic approach throughout the work. The scene balances agonizing drama with lyricism in an artistic symbiosis. Voice and orchestra function here as partners. The imaginative, sensitive orchestration carries and shares some of the melodic material in fragments. At other points it provides rich but controlled accompanimental gestures, never overbearing and never overpowering the words. After the woman’s initial hysterical shriek, she settles into a mystical, respectful prayer with lyrical yet gripping short melodic motives or phrases—and only occasional intervallic leaps for emphasis. There is an overall arch to her emotional plea, building albeit quietly to her steadfast insistence on divine intervention (“From here I will not move”) that leads into her brief dialogue with the *shames* about Psalm recitations for her.

The Tamkins seized a few opportunities to evoke humor, as Alex explained, “with all possible conspicuousness.” For example, while one might attach conservatively some subtle humor to An-Ski’s portrayal of Meyer, the Tamkins took it further to create a bit of sung verse—apparently based on an old folk song—that would likely induce audience laughter as a momentary theatrical release of tension. When the elderly woman can offer the *shames* only ten kopeks for all ten who would recite Psalms on her behalf—leaving him only one for himself—he sings with a combination of mild annoyance and comic resignation to the lot of the penurious pious such as his:

“If I sold [burial] shrouds  
 No one would die;  
 If I sold lamps,  
 Then in the sky  
 The sun for spite  
 Would shine at night.”

The orchestral prelude to Act II has a mystical foreboding about it, anticipating Leah’s possession with cleverly conceived solo instrumental passages backed subtly by the full orchestra. The curtain rises to reveal the *batlonim* explaining to a guest the significance of the “holy grave” of the murdered bride and bridegroom in the seventeenth century, only to move seamlessly into Sender’s feast for the town’s beggars and other poor—and, most prominently, to their dancing. Tamkin made the most of this opportunity, expanding An-Ski’s prescription for dancing into what Alex Tamkin described as creating the scene as a “choreographic drama in itself.” The dancing beggars and singers are masked as they move to pulsating rhythmic music, enacting the suggested collective role of the souls of the dead who have returned to sing and dance at the wedding festivities. Here, Tamkin the sophisticated film scorer comes to the fore, though neither inappropriately nor burdened with clichés. The scene builds to a “milling frenzy,” which is

supposed to clear the audience's senses in preparation for the traumatic event soon to occur: Khonon's possession of Leah in the form of a *dybbuk*. At that, the tempestuous whirling comes to a halt. The Messenger bends over Leah's prostrate form and announces the possession. A frozen silence takes hold of the stage as the dancers step back. They have been holding white handkerchiefs with each other while dancing, which they now drop—leaving the handkerchiefs to flutter to the ground as the curtain falls.

ACT III opens as an illusion. Instead of the immediate setting of the large room or study in the home of Reb Azriel, the Mirapol *rebbe*, according to An-Ski's stage instructions, here there are converging sets of numerous closed doors—making invisible the humanly realistic characters until they make their entrances and exits, move around, speak, sing, and listen to one another. In the wake of what is envisioned at first as a quasi-dream, they all appear in a sense to become spiritually possessed, as if all are soaring to new heights.

The Messenger's lengthy narrative about the "heart of the world," thought too tangential an impediment to the operatic action, was replaced with an epigrammatic quatrain devoid of An-Ski's imagery:

One angel dreams  
And the worlds quake;  
One man sins  
And the heavens dream.

The role of the Mirapol town rabbi, Rav Shimshon (Samuel), was eliminated because the Tamkins thought that a new, "outside" character might confuse the audience, which would not have been prepared for his significance—nor, for that matter, for his existence. In the play it is Rabbi Shimshon who brings the thematic development toward the ultimate climax, with his vision of the long (physically) dead Nisn ben Rifke—his claim of Sender's unkept promise and his demands now for justice. But here in the opera, all this is left to Reb Azriel to report at the hearing. Nor does Nisn's spirit actually appear and refuse overtly to accept the verdict. This, too, is left to Reb Azriel to relate, and it is echoed by some of the Hassidim there. Meanwhile, the libretto takes An-Ski's conception of the Messenger further by imagining him in messianic terms as a symbolic personification of the Prophet Elijah.

Instead of the exchange between Leah and Khonon's *dybbuk*—his acknowledgment of defeat, his promise to vacate, his inability to do so, and his and Leah's mutual realization that they are irrevocably and eternally one—Leah simply joins the "voice of Khonon" in singing their version of a reference to the Song of Songs:

"*Shir Hashirim*, Song of Songs,  
Song of Love, *Hashirim*.  
O my bride, come unto me,  
Raise my soul in glory.  
Blessed be our love,  
*Shir Hashirim*, Song of Songs."

Their actual merging, by which they look forward to ever-ascending heights, is not explicitly depicted as it is in the play. But their joint singing of those words signifies the eternal union of their souls as Leah falls dead. Gazing down upon her lifeless body, the Messenger repeats "*Mipnei ma?*" as the final curtain comes down.

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With a commitment for a fully staged production by the late 1940s still not secured, Tamkin extracted certain parts of the opera and reworked them into a concert version for tenor and orchestra in eight movements. It was premiered in Portland, Oregon, in 1949, sung by the international operatic superstar Jan Peerce, with the Portland Symphony Orchestra conducted by Werner Janssen. For the concluding movement, Tamkin appended the newly composed "Song

of Israel,” which does not appear in the opera. It corresponds loosely to Khonon and Leah’s reference to the Song of Songs toward the end of Act III.

But for this final movement of the concert version, the new lyrics by Jack Brooks—a motion picture lyricist associated with Universal Pictures—form an overtly Zionist expression, referring to the roughly year-old new Jewish state as the Jewish people’s ultimate refuge. The concert version was premiered during the euphoria that surrounded the declaration of the State of Israel, at a time when the national consciousness of Jewish war and Holocaust victims was immediate and acute. These lyrics, however, appear to have been written before the actual date of Israel’s declaration of statehood (May 14, 1948), as the fifth line in the printed score reads “Oh, give them now their homeland.” For that 1949 premiere of the concert version, with Israel already a sovereign nation, the line was altered accordingly: “Oh, now they have their homeland.”

Eventually, despite strenuous objections from a number of members of the board of directors of the New York City Opera, the company undertook the production of *The Dybbuk*. After the premiere’s cancellation for the spring 1951 season, it took place, lavishly staged, on October 4, 1951, conducted by Joseph Rosenstock.<sup>3</sup>

By all accounts it was a triumph on all fronts. “The production of a very difficult and original work, which asks the utmost—musically and dramatically—of its interpreters,” wrote the exacting, difficult-to-please and often lordly critic Olin Downes in *The New York Times*, “was one of the most brilliant and revealing that this enterprising company has given of any of its novelties: The opera itself is in some respects the most original and important of the five American works that have figured in its repertory.”

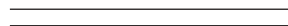
Regarding the musical attributes in particular, including orchestral technique, harmonic language and vocal lines, Downes noted that the opera was “strikingly modern in idiom and workmanship.”

*The Dybbuk* could be produced at any opera house in the world, wrote the famously caustic and often disagreeable as well as dismissive critic and composer Virgil Thomson in the *New York Herald Tribune*. An opera composer himself, he thought it “one of the most distinguished opera premieres in a city where opera premieres are unfortunately all too rare.” “Extraordinary music theatre,” wrote Robert Coleman, drama critic of the *New York Mirror*. “We have seen many productions of this classic [An-Ski] play in our time, but this is by all odds the most exciting. Here is modern music drama at its best.” And *The Christian Science Monitor*’s reviewer observed that the work emphasizes the function of theatre in opera.

From Jewish cultural perspectives, the most meaningful and welcome reaction came from the renowned Jewish music scholar and authority on Hassidic and cantorial music (and an accomplished conductor), Chemjo Vinaver, who was gratified by the reception of the subject matter of the opera by a contemporaneous American audience. “It is consoling to think,” Vinaver wrote in a learned review essay,

that there are still people capable of being carried away by the image of so irrational and mysterious a world . . . and one wonders whether after all there may not be the possibility in this country for a Jewish culture above the borscht-and-bagels level that some of our entrepreneurs of culture seem to have decided is all we can take.

In that context we should take note of Alex Tamkin’s concluding remarks in his introduction to his libretto. “This much we do know,” he wrote with reference to the vexing issues of dissimilarity between drama and opera and whether either was to predominate, “that the libretto and music were conceived in an American locale and dedicated to American thought and consideration.”



## ENDNOTES

- 1 Born in the Ukraine, Tamkin was less than a year old when his parents brought him to America as immigrants and settled in Portland, Oregon (where his brother Alex was born). He began violin lessons as a child and was eventually in a class together with the future distinguished concert and soundtrack violinist, Louis Kaufman. Kaufman and his wife became Tamkin's lifelong friends and were instrumental in promoting and garnering support for his opera, *The Dybbuk*.

Tamkin studied composition with Francis Richter and then with a number of teachers in New York, after which he was a student at the University of Oregon. He also worked briefly with Ottorino Respighi and Ernest Bloch before settling in Los Angeles. In 1949, when Universal Pictures made much of its staff redundant, he was retained there as an arranger and orchestrator.

Between 1947 and 1960 Tamkin worked on nearly forty films, including *Swell Guy* with Ann Blyth, *The Fighting O'Flynn* with Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., *You Gotta Stay Happy* with Eddie Albert, and *Singapore* with Fred MacMurray and Ava Gardner; and he orchestrated most of the film scores for Dimitri Tiomkin. In addition to *The Dybbuk*, his works of Jewish interest include a second opera, *The Blue Plum Tree*, based on the biblical story of Jacob and Esau, and an orchestral version of Joseph Achron's *Stempenyu Suite*.

- 2 The English translation appears to be that of Henry G. Alsberg and Winifred Katzin as published in their book *The Dybbuk: A Play by S. Ansky* (NY, 1926), but with the words "within itself" eliminated. Alsberg and Katzin's rendering of *oyfkumen* as "resurrection," however, is retained—which was probably ill-advised owing to the immediate Christological and therefore potentially confusing association. "Ascent," which has been used elsewhere, is preferable.
- 3 See in Jean Dalrymple, *From the Last Row* (Clifton, NJ, 1975). According to this account, Laszlo Halasz, the artistic and music director of the New York City Opera at the time, had proposed a production of *The Dybbuk* for the previous spring, but the board turned it down even after certain contractual financial commitments had already been made—not only out of financial concerns, but because some members were convinced that it could not be a success. This had infuriated Halasz, who went ahead with the premiere the following season despite the dissension it was causing amongst the board, with about half the members still opposed and accusing Halasz of arrogance in his defiance. Meanwhile, Frederick Umhey, the executive secretary of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union, and Jacob S. Potofsky, the head of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers union—both also members of the board of directors of City Opera—contributed \$12,500 each from their respective organizations toward the premiere.

In the event, Halasz's courageous persistence, which permanently antagonized too many board members, cost him his job. See in Martin Sokol, *The New York City Opera* (NY, Macmillan, 1981).