

## THE FIRST YIDDISH OPERA: KING AHAZ BY SAMUEL ALMAN

Interview with

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**ALEX:** How did you find the authentic score after all these years? And what problems did you encounter? It must have been complicated.

**NEIL:** Indeed it was. First of all, I needed two versions of the score: the fully orchestrated score, apparently completed just in time for the premiere in March, 1912; and the piano-vocal score, showing a completion date of 1911—which is what would have been used for the singers to learn their parts and for coaching sessions. Both took a great deal of time and tenacity to find. The last performance was in 1913, after which Alman pretty much put the whole episode behind him and focused on synagogue music and on classical, Jewishly-related chamber music. We programmed some of his Yiddish and Hebrew Lieder at two YIVO concerts a few years ago.

Alman had no children. But he had two nieces, both of whom I interviewed a while ago. They had everything of Alman's saved papers, scores, memorabilia, etc. The last surviving of the two donated everything to the Jewish Music Institute (JMI) at SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies) at the University of London for an Alman Archive. But to this day that Archive has never been set up, and everything remains in an off-site storage facility—inaccessible to the public, and with no inventory yet, much less a catalogue. I had to go all the way to the Vice-President of the university (the president is Princess Anne!), who interceded to get me the cooperation of the JMI director. She organized a search through all the stored items for me, but not everything I needed was found there. Meanwhile, through “networking” remotely among various London colleagues and other contacts over the past two years, I learned that one score in manuscript is at the British Library, which was closed during the pandemic so that I couldn't have anyone go there and make a copy to forward. Then I found a private individual who had purchased another manuscript copy as a collector. But it didn't have the text underlay—the words. And anyway, what I needed first and thus more urgently was the piano-vocal reduction.

Of course, Alman conducted the performances from a full orchestral score. But which manuscript of the various ones, since no two would be exactly the same? There was no photocopying procedure in those days, and he might have made changes until the “final” one used at the premiere and, we can only assume, thereafter. Moreover, it appears that the one that might be most likely to have the words seems to have been “appropriated” underhandedly by a particular individual who of course would not acknowledge that, so that it is inaccessible—even though I've been able to discover just who that is. So until an orchestral score with the words can be located, we have to assume that Alman conducted with all the words committed to memory—not an easy thing even for his own libretto.

You can imagine how long all this took and how frustrating it was. Eventually, refusing to give up, I found that Alman's widow had sent both an orchestral score and a piano-vocal reduction, along with a typedraft of the libretto, to the library of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem (now the National Library of Israel) in the early 1950s, hoping for a revival there that never came close to happening. Gila Flam, Director, the Music Department and Sound Archives of the NLI, was kind enough to have both scores and the libretto digitized and forwarded to me, along with a batch of correspondence between one of Alman's nieces and the Hebrew University.

So now I finally had a piano-vocal score with all the words from which to work. The first step was to decipher the cursive handwriting of the transliterations under the vocal lines—probably, as I can determine for several reasons, the handwriting of a copyist other than the composer. And there was much sloppiness in random transliterations and spellings—YIVO didn't yet exist then, so there was no such thing as standardized YIVO spellings. Then, since the full orchestral score at the NLI also has no text underlay, I had to create it by filling it in according to the piano-vocal reduction and the libretto, resolving many discrepancies. By now I've reconstructed a few arias and choruses, thereby developing the procedure that would be followed were the entire orchestral score ever to be reconstructed for a fully staged revival of the opera.

**ALEX:** What issues did you have to address and resolve concerning the Yiddish, apart from the handwriting, spelling, and so on? I imagine it wasn't simple or straightforward.

**NEIL:** Hardly! There was a hodgepodge of inconsistent dialects. My policy was to redo everything in STANDARD, YIVO LITERARY Yiddish—in terms of pronunciation and spelling as well as transliteration.

For Second Avenue-type shows it's a different story. For reconstruction of those we *WANT* the Yiddish as it was pronounced on stage in those days—both for authenticity of what was not a high-brow medium and for the rhyme scheme of the songs. But for the high-culture operatic genre the Yiddish should conform or be made to conform to proper learned, literary Yiddish. And as we know, YIVO was instrumental in setting these standards from the outset, and preserving and promoting them here. Also, Alman was highly educated and a reader of serious literature, so that he would have wanted the most correct and authoritative Yiddish for the opera.

Two of the many things I also had to address were:

§ Sprinklings here and there, albeit not consistently of *Daytshmerish*—the “Germanizing” of established Yiddish words or phrases. By the late 19th century this practice, almost a fashion of sorts, had become especially frequent in high dramas and even in some poetry, on the misguided assumption that it gave an elevated cultural sheen to the Yiddish. And it leaked into general usage in some circles. So, for example, the Yiddish word for “grave”, *keyver* (from the Hebrew), could acquire the alternative *rue plats* (lit., resting place), as in the once well-known poem by Morris Rosenfeld, which, in one of its musical settings, became even better known as a song. Anyway, each of these instances in the text underlay had to be addressed individually and resolved on a case-by-case basis.

§ Some words or phrases in the text underlay are in actual German, which appears to be the work of a copyist. This posed the problem first, of determining what Alman actually meant, not necessarily how the German translates on its own; and then adjusting the corresponding rhythmic values, stresses, etc. of the vocal line(s) to fit the proper Yiddish and number of syllables.

Sometimes all of this involved carefully considered choices, even a measure of reasoned guesswork.

**ALEX:** What are the other four Yiddish operas that followed *King Ahaz*?

**NEIL:** Insofar as we can know, the next was *Di himlen brenen* (The Heavens Are Ablaze) by Moses Milner, completed in 1923; then *Dovid un bas sheva* (David and Bathsheba) by Henoah Kon, 1924; *Gimpel the Fool* by David Schiff, 1979; and *Gan eydn fun a nar* (Fool's Paradise) by Ofer Ben-Amots, 1993.

**ALEX:** Opera is famous for requiring what's called "a willing suspension of disbelief" in many cases. Does this apply to anything in *King Ahaz*?

**NEIL:** Yes. For example, the 8th-century BCE Judeans in Jerusalem quote from *Eikha* (the biblical Book of Lamentations). But it wasn't even written until hundreds of years later. They sing Hebrew liturgy that wasn't composed until more than a thousand years later. We are asked to accept that the entire Judean population switched "overnight" as it were from enthusiastic paganism to sudden elation at the return to Judaism. And there are references to provisions in the Torah that have no application to situations in the opera to which they are attached, obviously with liberal license for dramatic, operatic effect.

**ALEX:** Do we know the makeup of the 1912-13 London audiences for *King Ahaz* in terms of understanding Yiddish?

**NEIL:** *King Ahaz* was produced on London's now-fabled East End, then and for some time to come home to England's largest concentration of Yiddish-speaking immigrants and their next one or two generations—in some ways—but only some—analogue to New York's Lower East Side in that time frame, but much larger and comprising several districts or neighborhoods. The opera's premiere inaugurated the brand new **FEINMAN YIDDISH PEOPLE'S THEATRE - TEMPLE OF ART** on its opening night on the East End. The audiences were mostly if not entirely East Enders (except for the critics), albeit with various degrees of sophistication.

For some this was their first opera experience. But other East Enders had already developed an affinity for opera, having heard famous opera arias sung in Yiddish translations on East End stages. Nonetheless, some local Jewish newspapers cautioned in advance about proper behavior at an opera, which comes across now as rather humorous. On the other hand, one non-Jewish, well-meaning reviewer noted that the premiere was probably the first time in the history of opera that men in the audience were wearing *kipot* (which he called "cloth caps").

It is highly unlikely that anyone came from among the older Jewish establishment on "the other side of town" as it were. For such was the intensity with which the establishment collectively despised Yiddish or anything remotely connected to it. They feared it would embarrass them and jeopardize their hard-won social and even political standing as "Englishmen of the Jewish faith" (or "race", which was then accepted terminology in England and not necessarily ill-intended). In certain ways, though with different resonances and sensibilities, that attitude was not altogether unlike that of the German-Jewish establishment in America in the same time frame.

Another reviewer of the 1912 premiere was probably correct in observing that the only one there from "west of Temple bar" was Sir Francis Montefiore, who presided over the opening ceremonies of both the opera and the new theater.

So it's pretty clear that those audiences understood Yiddish completely. However, I should point out that in grand opera the words are not always clear even to those for whom the language is their primary if not only one—especially in the high dramatic soprano register against full orchestra. So nowadays even operas in English here most often have supertitles.

**ALEX:** What if anything did the critical success of *King Ahaz* tell about the viability of Yiddish for opera?

**NEIL:** One non-Jewish reviewer for the general press opined that Yiddish is indeed eminently suitable, regardless of the subject of the opera.

Even today, however, it has been argued even by those sympathetic to Yiddish culture that Yiddish simply cannot work for opera—especially outside the Greater New York area, and even there not for long. That argument’s grounds are that regular opera audiences will have no familiarity with Yiddish as they do at least to some extent with the most typical languages of the most popular and most frequently produced operas, viz., Italian, French, German, and even Russian, even if fluency is lacking; that Yiddish is too idiomatic and culturally specific, including for translation for supertitles or libretti; and that there are no longer any operatically trained singers who know, much less command Yiddish—as there were in London in 1912 and in pre-WWII cities such as Warsaw and Łódź.

At first those points can seem at least reasonable. But if we probe them we can take issue with all of them—certainly in principle. How many in any American audience for Dvořák’s *Rusalka* or Smetana’s *The Bartered Bride* have any familiarity with Czech—their original language in which they are most frequently sung? The same for Hungarian, in, for example, Bartok’s *Bluebeard’s Castle*. But the most potent ammunition for rebuttal is found in the extraordinary (for some, inexplicable) public success of operas by Philip Glass that employ such ancient, arcane languages as Sanskrit, Arcadian, and an extinct purported language of ancient Egyptians. Do we presume that diction coaches for those languages are more easily found than those for Yiddish? Do we suppose that even a single singer at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York, for example, or a single person in the audience, knows or has ever heard even one word of Arcadian or Sanskrit? And yet those Glass operas continue to meet with undiminished enthusiasm and are consistently sold out.

I recognize, of course, that the analogy is imperfect, since much of the lure of those Glass operas lies in a certain seduction of the occult—especially that of an invented antiquity—coupled with the undiminished (but difficult for some to fathom) enticement of so-called minimalism (though Glass rejects that tag in general). Still, the importance of words is inextricable from the medium of opera per se, yet votaries of those operas seem not to mind their inability to understand any of them. And if supertitles satisfy, they would do no less so for Yiddish, even if some of us find them distracting for any opera.

Finally, although this can come across as nearly heretical to some, Yiddish is hardly the only language that relies significantly on untranslatable idioms and expressions peculiar to its unique host cultural sensibilities, mind-sets, worldviews, humor, experiences and orientations. Even the most frequently heard languages of opera, such as French, German, or Italian, are filled with them. Yet their idiomatic singularity does not preclude productions of operas in those languages, even though, for example, neither the French *savoir faire*, *sangfroid*, *je ne sais quoi*, *beau monde*, *esprit de corps*, *belle epoch*, nor the German *Weltanschauung*, *Schadenfreude*, *Zeitgeist*, or *Gemütlichkeit* have any satisfactory English equivalents that convey on their own the spirit, essence, allusions or flavors of their original cultural contexts. So at least in principle it may not necessarily be the case ipso facto that Yiddish cannot also be a viable language for opera.

**ALEX:** Do you think *King Ahaz* is worthy of a staged revival?

**NEIL:** Yes, under the right conditions and circumstances; and not just because of its place in the history of Jewish culture **OR** opera, but for its musical merit. A concert version, however, would neither do it justice nor “make the point” and would not be worth the effort or costs.

The first step would be a meticulous reconstruction of the score to produce a usable performance edition. And the libretto could stand some revision. But all of this is certainly possible with the requisite (and considerable) financial underwriting. And of no little importance is that it could encourage contemporary composers to consider writing operas in Yiddish.