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OPERA IN MODERN ISRAEL
Marc Lavry: *DAN HASHOMER*

by NEIL W. LEVIN, *Anne E. Leibowitz Visiting Professor-in-Residence in Music*

Nil ego contulerim iucundo sanus amico.
(Never while I keep my senses shall I compare anything
to the delight of a friend.)
—Horace [Quintus Horatius Flaccus]

Nitimur in vetitum semper, cupimusque negata.
(We ever strive for what is forbidden, and ever covet
what is denied.)
—Ovid [Publius Ovidius Naso]

The Hebrew opera *Dan Hashomer* (Dan the Watchman) by the Israeli composer Marc Lavry was the first opera to be both composed and premiered in modern Israel—what was then known as Palestine under the British Mandate.[1] From the late 1930s through at least the 1960s, Lavry (1903–1967), along with Paul Ben-Haim, was one of the two composers of modern Israel whose music was most familiar in the international classical music world, especially in America. And, like Ben-Haim, Lavry was widely recognized for forging a new sound and style that became known as the Mediterranean school (an appellation not universally accepted), which explored, promoted, and exhibited the heady spirit of Jewish national rejuvenation in a Near Eastern setting that was entirely foreign to the immigrants from Europe. The Mediterranean school—which included a number of other gifted composers who drew little if any attention abroad—also reflected and emphasized an idealized, sunny geographical atmosphere.

Lavry became known in particular for his frequent juxtapositions of the "new"—represented by the aura of Hebrew Palestinian folksong and folk-type song developed by the settlers and pioneers of the *y'shuv*, especially during the second and third *aliya* periods—and the "old" and "former," viz., the imprint of cultivated art music of the European environments from which the older generation of settlers and/or their parents had come. He also peppered much of his music with what were then considered exotic influences, such as Arab, Druse, Cerkesian, Bedouin, and other long-standing Near Eastern elements.

Lavry, who was born in Riga, Latvia, was firmly grounded in European classical music traditions, studying at the principal conservatories in Riga and Leipzig. By the time of his *aliya*, in 1936, he had also conducted major symphony orchestras and other ensembles in Central and Western Europe.[2]

Dan Hashomer was composed between 1940 and 1943 to a libretto by Max Brod, after the story "*Yeri'ot al hakibbutz*" (Shots Fired on the Kibbutz), by the celebrated author and playwright Sh. Shalom [Shalom Yosef Shapira, 1904–1990). Written against the backdrop of the Arab rebellion of 1936–39, *Dan Hashomer* is a quintessentially complicated, triangular—yet in some ways simplistic as well as implausible—love story and a nationally driven picture of kibbutz life of the period, with its symbiotic combination of idealism and ever-present mortal danger. And there are constant erotic as well as generational tensions.

Filled with symbolism and character development, the twin—in some cases overlapping—plots are set on a relatively small kibbutz in the north. Dan, the watchman, or guard, is tormented by hallucinatory obsessions. But it is no hallucination that he and his longtime best friend Naḥman—gregarious, outgoing, and uninhibited (unlike Dan)—are in love with the same young woman, Efrat, who is portrayed as a tender, compassionate, gentle-hearted, and loving orphan. She is, however, considered Dan's wife—according to the accepted manner of nonreligious kibbutz marriage then, which was commonly without benefit of any religious ceremony or any state agency or bureaucratic registration or recognition, merely a couple's decision to "be wed." Yet Dan, as opposed to Naḥman, finds it difficult to express his love. Another young woman, Yemima, on the other hand, is madly in love with Naḥman.

The older generation, presumably or at least mostly eastern European immigrants, many with some degree of religious orientation, are at odds with the typically freethinking young *ḥalutzim* (pioneers) on the kibbutz who have freed themselves from all religious observances as well as any former socioeconomic goals—in pursuit, instead, of a secular, nonmaterialistic Jewish society. Their behavior, manners, and values clash starkly with those of their parents' generation. Among the latter, however, is one exception: the elderly but idealistic Velvele, who understands and admires the idealism of the young *ḥalutzim* for their commitment to rebuilding a Jewish nation in its historic land. When the gang of Arab marauders attacks the kibbutz, Velvele is among the first to join in resisting them, without concern for his own life. He is killed in the process—one of the first (if not the first) such victims.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

DAN, the Watchman/Guard	Baritone
EFRAT, his wife	Soprano
NAḤMAN	Tenor
YEMIMA	Soprano
REB VELVELE	Bass
AḤMED	Tenor
REB BUNIM	Bass
NAOM	Child Soprano
THE SHADOW	Baritone
RINA	Soprano
SHMUEL, SIMON	Spoken parts
Choruses: Women, Elders, Children	SA/SATB/TB

Original orchestration: 2/pic. 2/eh, 2, 2-3, 3, 3, 1 timp., 2 harps, strings

THE ACTION

ACT I, in the center of the kibbutz

A group of girls sing as they do laundry while Efrat is on her way to do other work. Naḥman makes seductive overtures to her, though he is aware that Efrat knows that Dan needs her and her support, and that he could not do without her. But Naḥman does not give up his pursuit.

Dan feels responsible not only for the security of the kibbutz, but somehow, in his imagination, almost by extension—in his "philosophical" obsession—for all mankind. When he returns from guard duty, Efrat, concerned about what she sees as his related hallucinations about a coming battle with the "great enemy" Satan, pleads with him to just go to bed.

Meanwhile, Aḥmed, an Arab friend of the kibbutz, warns of a group of Arab marauders and plunderers in the vicinity. He gives Yemima a headdress similar to the ones typically worn by gangs of Arab attackers, for use as a disguise in any possible upcoming clash.

Several kibbutzniks enter, among them Shimon, who intends to leave the kibbutz for fear of both malaria and security issues. Meanwhile, although the Arab gang in the area has offered a reward for Dan's life, he refuses to leave his post even when Naḥman offers to substitute for him.

Dan thinks Naḥman's behavior is suspicious, and he concludes that their longtime friendship is somehow over.

In the orange grove, the joyful experience of picking oranges overcomes the fear of the looming danger. This optimistic spirit exemplifies the general euphoria of the settlers' commitment to rejuvenation of their land in their mission to create a new, agriculturally based order.

ACT II, Scene 1, in the yard of the parents' building

The older generation of parents from Europe have not come to terms with the behavior, attitudes, conduct, and values of the younger generation of kibbutzniks, and they are highly and openly critical. One exception is Velvele (the diminutive for Velvel, who has made a point of keeping his European, i.e. Yiddish, name rather than taking on a Hebrew one), who defends and befriends the younger generation. Efrat asks him to pray for Dan, inasmuch as Dan is a "soul in danger." The younger generation would not have known the liturgy or even how to pray, which is but one of the tensions between the two generations. And Rabbi Bunim reminds the older generation of their former life in the Diaspora. There follows the "Dance of the Elderly."

Children gather around "grandfather" Velvele to hear stories. In the meantime, Shmuel, head of the kibbutz, calls for all to be prepared for the coming attacks. Gunshots are heard, but Velvele reassures everyone, keeping the panic at bay.

Scene 2, in Efrat's room

Naḥman comes in and embraces Efrat. Dan enters to say goodbye before he leaves to stand watch all night, where he'll be in great danger, and he doesn't notice—or pretends not to notice—Naḥman's embrace of Efrat. Apparently to the contrary, he asks Naḥman to look after and protect his beloved Efrat.

Scene 3

The alarm sounds with the beginning of the expected attack. Women join the men in the defense, but Efrat runs to the watchtower to be with Dan. Naḥman asks Yemima to give him the Arab headdress as a disguise so that he can get past the attackers and try to reach the nearest town for help. Velvele, in joining the defense upon the initial attack, becomes its first victim.

ACT III

Dan and his fellow kibbutznik assistants are on guard. The attack has been beaten back, and he sings "The Watchman's Song" as an aria. Alone again, he thinks he sees a dark shadow: the "Satan" or "evil force" about which he has been obsessed. He feels tempted by it to take vengeance and shoot Naḥman, then justify it by claiming that he thought he was shooting one of the attackers. But he resists that urge and shoots at the shadow of his hallucinations instead.

Naḥman arrives with help. Yemima and Efrat rush in, concerned about the safety of Dan and his assistants. Dan and Naḥman reconcile and resume their friendship. Their reconciliation becomes the symbol of kibbutz unity.

By dawn, the peaceful work of the kibbutz is resumed—"back to normal" in the new order of the settled "ancient Land of Israel."

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Jehoash Hirshberg, perhaps the leading scholar and authority on the musical life of the *y'shuv*, referred to *Dan Hashomer* as a love story taking place "between two collectives: that of the young kibbutzniks and that of the older parents." He astutely observed that each group is represented by what can be perceived as its own emblematic music: the younger generation by the *hora* folk dance model, and the parents' generation by eastern European Hassidic-influenced music. Yet that observation, although not without merit, might have been a bit oversimplified, even though Lavry did indeed contrast the two generations by different musical approaches. But the older, eastern European melos is not necessarily or specifically Hassidic. On the other hand, the younger generation is represented by indigenous Arabic tune fragments and modalities—elements of the new so-called Mediterranean school techniques that Lavry championed—and folk-type music then popular with the *ḥalutzim* and indicative of the spirit of modern Israel. Lavry either arranged or had composed some of the latter prior to the opera and then included it in various guises. The juxtaposition of the two musics or musical styles provides a clever distinction between the generations and their differing predispositions, sensibilities, and partialities.

Dan Hashomer is admittedly dated, in its storyline and even in many of its musical echoes of the *y'shuv*. Twenty-first-century audiences may have difficulty making sense of it or finding resonance in it. Unlike many operas and plays that can withstand creative new productions that reimagine their time periods, settings, places, or character identifications, we cannot imagine how this opera could undergo successfully any such transformations. All of its elements are tied unalterably and exclusively to the kibbutz culture of the 1930s and to the spirit of collective unity fundamental to that stage of the Zionist enterprise, taking precedence over interpersonal issues, interactions, jealousies, and conflicts. Still, the dramatic tensions can hold an audience's attention and perhaps even be interpreted on an intersecting universal plane. And kibbutz life of that time, portrayed faithfully in the opera, can be appreciated for its idealism and for the dangers it faced courageously. Much of the music, especially in the way Lavry developed a folk melos with classical treatment to become arias and expertly written choral numbers, warrants a revival precisely *as* a period piece. Then, too, there are the deliberately unresolved personal issues, leaving us to imagine the various possibilities. At the end we are left wondering: Just what does the reconciliation between Dan and Naḥman actually mean vis-à-vis Efrat?

Conducted by its composer, *Dan Hashomer* was given its premiere in Tel Aviv in 1945 by the Palestine Folk Opera and was then produced more than thirty times in eight cities and towns in Mandatory Palestine.

Among its most memorable vocal numbers are Efrat's aria, "*Lo av li v'lo em*" (I Have No Father or Mother); Dan's baritone aria "*Hanita*," a setting of one of Sh. Shalom's poems; and the chorus that opens the third act, "*Ma milaila bahanita*."

In a radio interview in the 1960s Lavry described how he wrote "*Hanita*." During the Arab uprisings of 1938–39 he and an acquaintance took a drive, winding up in Lower Hanita, in the Galilee, where they met a group of soldiers who were preparing to take over the strategic hill above. Shortly after they arrived, they heard gunshots in the distance, but were not allowed to turn back. With nothing else to do, Lavry began writing the song that became "*Hanita*" to the poem by Sh. Shalom, which his companion—an old veteran of the Hagana—happened to know. As Lavry created the song, which was deliberately simple, the men and women soldiers began to sing along with him phrase by phrase. Every time they all sang a phrase, the Arabs on the hill across from them echoed it, with "an eastern trill and Arabic embellishment." Lavry kept those features in "*Hanita*" both as a song on its own and when he subsequently incorporated it into the opera as a baritone aria for Dan.

ENDNOTES

1 Abraham Zvi Idelsohn's Hebrew opera, *Bat yiftaḥ* [*Jiftah*, 1922] (Jephta's Daughter) is, as far as we know, the first opera in Hebrew and the first written in Palestine. It did not, however, have a premiere there, nor any performances. Although Idelsohn composed at various times in his life, he was primarily a musicologist and ethnomusicologist, often considered the "father" or grandfather of Jewishly related endeavors in both fields. And his accomplishments in those fields were monumental. But the opera, which some have considered more a musical drama in five acts, is of limited musical merit and probably does not warrant reconstruction and staging.

2 For a bit more information concerning Lavry, see my biographical sketch in the accompanying booklet to the Milken Archive for Jewish Music/NAXOS CD, *Sacred Services from Israel* (8.559452), which—together with my discussion in the same booklet on the Mediterranean school and style that began in Mandatory Palestine—can also be found on the Milken Archive website. More information can be found on the Lavry website, organized by his daughter, other descendants, and family members: www.marclavry.org.