

Lazare Saminsky: *THE VISION OF ARIEL* **AN OPERA-BALLET**

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The Vision of Ariel, an opera-ballet in one act, is one of several stage works by Lazare Saminsky (1882–1959) in which he experimented with combining elements of choral, symphonic, operatic vocal, and dance media within a single unified expression. “In my operas,” he reflected in his memoirs, “I have tried a complete absorption of ballet as a self-dependent agent of parallel action . . . I aimed at reaching out for a new form, sure and self-sufficient.” His artistic vision in terms of dance concerned liberating its music from what he saw as “formulaic uses.” At the same time, he aimed for music that—as this opera demonstrates—is equally viable as absolute music and as opera, with sufficient drama of its own. In fact, *The Vision of Ariel* is more an opera than anything else, despite its inclusion of ballet and notwithstanding Saminsky’s experiment.

There was a time when Saminsky, an immigrant American composer from the Russian Empire via preliminary émigré sojourns along the way in Constantinople, what was then known as Palestine, Paris, and London, was a highly regarded force in the Greater New York area’s so-called new music world—particularly in the 1930s and 1940s. He composed in a wide variety of genres, including five symphonies, much chamber music, Hebrew and Yiddish lieder, dance, and a great deal of Hebrew liturgical music.¹

By the time of his death, however, and for decades afterward, his luster seems to have dimmed, and his recognition has come to be limited mostly to historical musicologists, a few learned societies devoted to deliberations and publications on Jewishly related music, and, to some extent, to cantors and choirmasters in Reform congregations, albeit not much beyond the 1970s. But the late twentieth century witnessed the stirrings of a revival of interest in his music, as exemplified by Neal Stulberg’s recordings of his symphonies on the NAXOS label, along with frequently increasing requests to examine his papers, which, as of this writing, are being held at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York City.

The title of Saminsky’s unpublished autobiography, *The Third Leonardo: Illusions of a Warrior Civilization*, obviously implies an inflated ego. Yet in many respects he was truly a Renaissance man. In addition to his academic as well as his artistic directions in classically oriented music, he was equally drawn to mathematics and philosophy, and he published and lectured widely on both subjects.

He was also deeply involved in the circumscribed sphere of academically oriented Jewish music studies and colloquia in New York. This was a continuation of his prominent role in and his contributions to the Gesellschaft für jüdische Volksmusik (Society for Jewish Folk Music) in Russia before his emigration, and he participated in groundbreaking field expeditions in various parts of the empire for the discovery and preservation of Jewish folk music, which was on the verge of becoming extinct in another generation or so.

As director of music at New York’s fabled Temple Emanu-El for thirty-four years, he was the first to commission classically oriented composers to write liturgical music; and he established the annual Three Choir Festival, which continued for twenty-three years, for which he invited contributions from many emerging young composers.

The Vision of Ariel is set against the backdrop of the Inquisition in Spain and lands under its dominance, and it addresses the resultant implications for those Jews who converted to Christianity under pressure but clung secretly to some Jewish practices or vestiges of Judaism.

Following the fierce persecutions on the Iberian Peninsula during the fourteenth century that culminated in the massacres of 1391, in which an estimated seventy thousand Jews were murdered and entire communities extinguished, significant numbers of Jews surrendered to baptism and conversion. That situation was repeated in the early fifteenth century, and some of these “new Christians,” or *conversos*, continued to observe some Jewish customs and ceremonies in secret. They were known as “crypto-Jews,” or as *Marranos* (lit. swine), an epithet that was originally attached to them but came to be accepted as common usage by Jews without its initial aspersion or opprobrium. As Christians, officially and legally, however, the *conversos* were now under the authority of the Inquisition—the Congregation of the Holy Office—thus subject to the same potentially deathly consequences that attended heresy or denial of the faith by any other Christians.

Even as historical fiction, *The Vision of Ariel* does not represent in its single act an historically researched effort by the composer (who was also its librettist), who had no reservations about taking artistic license. The action occurs in Flanders in the latter half of the sixteenth century, in a large, unnamed synagogue in the part of the Netherlands that, from at least 1584 to 1713, was under Spanish military and political control. Ariel, a *Marrano* there, parades under the disguise of Don Diego, presumably a Spanish nobleman. The name Ariel translates literally as “lion of God” and is also understood in Jewish tradition as a symbolic name for Jerusalem. The name can therefore represent pre-Diaspora Jewish sovereignty, and it is also biblically associated with the prophet Isaiah’s vision that warned the people about their iniquities. Here the vision is removed from those contexts to become a vision of resistance, inspired by a biblical account.

A prologue establishes the Spanish soldiers’ suspicion of Don Diego’s true identity. The first scene opens on the joyous festival of Purim, the annual commemoration of the supposed thwarted genocide of all Jewry in the ancient Persian Empire—as recounted in the biblical Book of Esther. In that story there is then the “eleventh hour” reprieve through Queen Esther’s intercession with her husband, the king, who enabled the Jews to defeat their enemies militarily and politically.²

The transition at the end of the first scene to Ariel’s vision in the next is described in Saminsky’s synopsis as a moment when “passing, formless clouds, shadows, strange lights efface the synagogue scene.”

Ariel’s vision in the second scene includes an image of his dead mother “in the mist,” praying over a lighted candelabra—presumably Sabbath candles. And then the dim silhouettes of helmeted soldiers and robed monks “transpire through the vapors,” after which Ariel faints.

Scene 3 returns to the eve of Purim in what Saminsky calls a “secret synagogue”—viz., secretly located and camouflaged as or within some unrelated building—in which *conversos* (essentially “newly Dutch” Jews) who had by then been allowed to leave Spain and Portugal worshipped clandestinely. (However, synagogues in Amsterdam at that time, were not only not secret at all, but were under the authority of a Dutch Sephardi Jewish community.) There, Ariel awakens from his trance and utters a lament in the form of a brief vocalese that heralds the melodic contours of the following, elaborate cantorial-choral prayer setting.

The congregants hear the crescendo of a commotion in the streets outside, which emanates from the jeers of a rabble as a group of Jewish martyrs—probably unmasked *Marranos*—are being led as condemned heretics in a procession to their deaths at the auto-da-fé. As they proceed, they sing the elegy for martyrs known as *Av harahamim* (Father of Mercies), which occurs in the Hebrew liturgy toward the end of the Torah service (the biblical readings at the end of the morning service) on Sabbaths. The prayer eulogizes specifically those Jews who were

slaughtered *as Jews*—i.e., for being and remaining Jews, refusing to renounce Judaism—during the period of the Crusades (through the twelfth and thirteenth centuries):

Father of all mercies, whose presence extends
beyond the vast expanses of the universe,
remember in mercy those faithful, those
righteous, those innocents of the holy
communities of Israel who surrendered
their souls for the sanctification of God's
name. They were beloved and admired during their
days on earth, and were not separated even by
death. They were swifter than eagles and
braver than lions in doing the will of their
Creator and in fulfilling the desires
of their sheltering rock.

May God remember them for good, together with
all the other righteous of the world, and render
retribution for the spilt blood of His
servants; as it is written in the Torah of
Moses, that man of God: "O nations, acclaim
His people, for He will avenge the blood
of His servants." (Deuteronomy 32:43)

The martyrs are naturally represented by the chorus in this setting of *Av haraḥamim*, sung outside the synagogue. Ariel, now as a cantor, sings the cantorial lines from inside as he observes the procession from a window. This is one of the most powerful and recalled theatrical episodes in the opera.

Although the text of *Av haraḥamim* has been set by many cantorial composers in a variety of styles and modalities (the most elaborate and perhaps best known of which is probably that by Zeidl Rovner [Jacob Samuel Maragowsky; 1856–1943]), the melodic material of the first part of Saminsky's interpretation is uniquely drawn from biblical cantillation motifs. These give way to more freely conceived, emotionally evocative tenor vocal lines for the cantor, set against pulsating figures in the orchestra at climactic points. This is a manifestly operatic expression, not intended as a functional setting for regular synagogue use. It has, however, been adapted and abbreviated for the latter purpose in traditional American synagogues and at one time enjoyed some currency. Here, a dynamic, intense orchestral interlude leads to a dramatic choral "sigh," which in turn proceeds to a mood of resignation and faith as the chorus resumes.

Following the *Av haraḥamim*, the congregants attempt to persuade Ariel to escape. But he refuses and instead, while everyone else retreats to the balcony, unsheathes his sword to await the soldiers.

The soldiers storm the building, and Ariel is slain in his battle with them. They then rush the balcony, from which, as Saminsky described, "an anguished cry is heard." The opera concludes with the continuation of the martyrs being led to their deaths.

Although Saminsky wrote the opera in 1916 in Tiflis, he revised it after immigrating to the United States—prior to a performance of only the finale in New York in 1953. *The Vision of Ariel* received its staged world premiere in its entirety in Chicago the following year.

ENDNOTES

- 1 For a more substantive biographical sketch of Saminsky, addressing his folk music field expeditions in the Russian Empire, his activities as part of the New Jewish National School in music, his years between his emigration from Soviet Russia and his settlement in New York, and other information, see my essay in the booklet accompanying the Milken Archive/NAXOS CD, *Jewish Music of the Dance*, 8.559439, which can also be found on the Milken Archive of Jewish Music website.
- 2 For a discussion of the historical, folkloric, fictional, and rabbinic bases for the festival of Purim, see the separate chapter here devoted to the subject.