

## Jazzing Akdomus.

### Tracing the Source of the Popular Song.

#### It Ain't Gonna Rain No More.

By Dr. A. A. Roback.

Some time ago I offered evidence to show that the Zionist anthem *Hatikvah* was originally based on a Czecho-Slovakian motive as it bore a close resemblance to a strain in Smetana's Symphonic Cycle *Ma Vlast*. Now, passing from the sublime to the ridiculous, I propose to draw a parallel between a chant which is dear to the heart of every orthodox Jew and a popular song which, though ephemeral in its glamour, was even better known than *Yes, We Have No Bananas*—I am referring, of course, to *Akdomus Adamuth* and *It Ain't Gonna Rain No More*. A strange assortment, indeed, but it is the French, I believe, who say: "It is always the impossible which happens."

Those who have read Peretz's wonderful tale *The Metamorphosis of a Tune* ("Der Gilgul foon 'a Niggun") will not be surprised that a sacred chant could become secularised and even profaned into a street ditty; for Peretz has traced the transmigration of his particular *Chassidic* motive through many stages until it finally received absolution. The appealing will not be overlooked no matter in what sphere it was born. More than one Gregorian chant owes its origin to a humble street ballad, and many a sacred hymn has been transformed into a *chansonette*. Wasn't it Alice Lloyd who brought action against the Salvation Army for appropriating at their outdoor services the titillating air of her *Swing Me Just a Little Bit Higher, Obadiah Do?* And it is my impression that the then idol of the music hall won her suit.

#### MOTIVES FROM JEWISH MUSIC.

So much for the introduction. But how about our parallel which seems to be so far-fetched? Is it likely that one would deliberately take recourse to a Jewish religious chant which in itself is of dubious excellence musically? The answer to this, of course, lies in the reproduction of the measures to be compared, and then the burden of deciding whether there has been a direct influence or whether what resemblance can be detected is merely a matter of coincidence, will be put on the reader.

We all realise that there is nothing so volatile, nothing so "catchy" as a tune; and neither

place nor time constitutes a barrier for the spreading of folk music. The famous Naumann in his *History of Music* tells us that Mendelssohn's well known *Hear, O Israel* in his *Elijah* oratorio was taken from a liturgical motive heard in the synagogue; and we have Rimsky-Korsakov's testimony (in *My Musical Life*) to the effect that some of Moussorgsky's most beautiful music was the offspring of Jewish motives.

In this country, we must remember, there is a greater likelihood of Jewish motives finding their way into the syncopated ragtime and jazz which are so characteristic of American music. As far back as 1917, I pointed out in an article entitled *The Jewish Stamp on American Music* that in spite of the fact that the American popular song is decidedly American in its tempo and spirit, a large number of them reveal Jewish chords and phrases; and the reason is not far to seek. So many of their creators are Jewish young men, and they have not been able to emancipate themselves from the vivid memories and associations of their youth.

Let us now approach our subject more directly. When I first heard the haunting *O, It Ain't Gonna Rain No More, No More*, it occurred to me immediately that it was different from the usual street song. It is hardly worth while to analyse its characteristics, for, as it is we are doing it too much honour, but then again, without documentation, one incurs the risk of making arbitrary statements.

#### A TYPICAL CHANT.

In the first place then, the *progression* of this popular song is different from the average run. It is *defiant*, almost triumphant in its joyous affirmation (which, had it come true, might have been less jubilantly expressed). Sing *It Ain't Gonna Rain* in a slow tempo, and you have typical chant—Something which cannot be said of the other popular songs.

Another peculiarity of this song is that it lends itself to parody. Hundreds of cynical verses were manufactured to be sung in the strain of *It Ain't Gonna Rain*. Why just this song should be singled out as the

mould for the numerous burlesques needs explanation. Probably it is for the same reason that the *Akdomus* motive can be repeated with a host of verses and yet not actually bore the listeners or, for that matter, the singers to an unbearable degree.

The relationship between the Jewish chant and the American street song is still not in any measure evident; and without reproducing a few phrases of both, one would be presumptuous in drawing even his own conclusions, let alone demanding conviction in others. Since musical resemblances, in order to be appreciated, require a certain amount of musical insight, I have resorted to the device of writing the words of the first verse of *Akdomus* to the music of the popular song, which technique I hope will in the interest of science (a certain branch of it at any rate,) not be considered a profanation, and conversely, the words of the street song to the notes of *Akdomus*. I am using the traditional version of the chant as sung by the Russian Jews; and for purposes of comparison the word *Milin* in the chant is repeated twice, not changed but merely repeated to balance the English words. Let the two versions be strummed on the piano, and probably even the uninitiated in music will be able to recognise in the popular song a jazz version of the ancient chant which the composer unwittingly elaborated.

#### RESEMBLANCE.

To be sure there are many progressions in classical music which resemble one another, but let us bear in mind that composers are often influenced by what they have assimilated without being aware of their appropriation, and Mendelssohn was spared the embarrassment if not disgrace of charges of plagiarism only through the alertness of a friend of his who was shown a certain air of *Elijah* in manuscript. Again it must be remarked that similar musical ideas may easily occur to gifted composers who are inspired by the same ideals and often are built of the same emotional texture and experience the same moods, but in the present case where there is such a disparity in every respect between the origination of the two compositions, the explanation by coincidence would be more far-fetched than that by direct or indirect influence. But as I promised at the outset the conclusion will not be pressed but submitted to the readers for their consideration.—*The Jewish Tribune*.