

"The Dybbuk" as an Opera

By Raymond Hall

The transition of what is essentially a Jewish legend to the opera stage has been tried before—and failed. This account, from the New York Times, tells, at last, of a success. The opera was originally produced in Milan.

BY long odds the most significant novelty heard at La Scala this season was Lodovico Rocca's opera "Il Dibuk" (The Demon), on Renato Simoni's book, which had its world première here recently. The event is worthy of special note, since the authors have broken with traditional melodramatic conventions. They and their well-wishers were comforted by a very encouraging success, twenty-one curtain calls, mostly undisputed and of ovational tone at the close. Subsequent performances have been equally well received, judging from reports reaching us and the applause heard in the broadcast.

The first interest lies in the unusual character of the story. Those familiar with the repertoire of the Habimah Yiddish Theatre will recall a play of the same title by Shalom Ansky, the pen name of the Polish Jewish poet Rappaport of Vitebsk. According to an ancient cabalistic theory, later become a current Jewish legend, the soul of a person who has met premature death in grave sin is reincarnated in the body of the one whom he most loved in life. This spirit was called the "Dybbuk," meaning demon. In its reincarnation it found peace and purification.

Such a subject might seem at first glance too lugubrious, too introspective and too "spiritistic" for a convincing opera book. But a closer examination at once reveals power, on a plane largely removed from exterior theatrical device. As one commentator has observed, the Dybbuk symbol may be conceived either theosophically, as the transmigration of the soul in search of spiritual perfection in unity with the being from which it has been separated, or in the philosophic sense of the fatally dominating human will until the achievement of freedom.

WHATEVER the interpretation, Ansky's mystic tragedy built about the legend is profoundly Semitic in its ethic and cosmic conceptions, and offers a unique canvas for the poet and musician who would seriously essay the Hebrew theatre. Young Rocca felt its fascination from his first reading, and though not himself a Jew, determined to set it. Renato Simoni, Puccini's co-librettist in "Turnadot," has ably reduced it to an Italian opera plot, respecting its spirit and prose form, but recasting its essential content.

The action is preceded, behind a second curtain, by a vocal prologue imagined in space. A "Messenger"—the Hebrew "Meshullach" or unseen being who reads the hearts of men, who knows and foresees all—proclaims the solemn pact consecrated between the friends Sender of Henie and Nyssen of Rivha, that if a boy and girl are born to them respectively, they shall marry. Recorded in the books of heaven, it is celebrated by the celestial voices in

choral liturgy, above which are heard the protagonists' voices.

Act I follows without pause. The scene takes place in the Polish ghetto of Brynitz, in the interior of a squalid synagogue at sunset, twenty years later. Under the light of a few candles at the rear, some Talmudist officiants bend over their musty tomes and wearily drone their psalmodies. Huddled by a stove, the sacristan Maier and a pair of "batlon" prayer mercenaries recount miracles in hushed voices. Before the Holy Writ two women kneel, invoking succour for loved ones. On a bench apart lies in pilgrim's garb, knapsack for pillow, the Messenger (a sort of Wagnerian wanderer). A mystic spirit reigns.

Beside the ritual lamp stands a young man in absent absorption: Hanan, the son of Nyssen, now dead. He is a poor Talmudic student, attached to the synagogue, who has wandered here from afar in search of his predestined spouse, Leah, daughter of the enriched Sender. His consuming aspiration is to wed his soul-mate, but the union is opposed by the avaricious father. In despair of divine assistance, the youth turns to the Zohar, or book of the cabala, for occult aid, much to the horror of Maier, who predicts calamity.

THEN Leah herself chances into the temple and there ensues a brief but impassioned dialogue between the lovers, one without hope. Sender arrives and, unmindful of the past, faithlessly announces Leah's betrothal to the wealthy merchant Menashe, and orders festivities. There follows Hanan's anguish, his blasphemy and death through the evil powers, the pilgrim's reprimand of Sender for his betrayal, the latter's terror and the flight of all present, save the Messenger, who relights the votive flame, which in the sinister silence casts a lurid glow on the victim's pallid, tortured features.

Act II, laid in a public square opening on Reb Sender's courtyard, depicts the nuptial feast, the brides' traditional dance with the most tattered beggar, the spectral phantasms which emerge from the adjacent tomb of the lover pair massacred in a recent pogrom, their infernal round, later joined by the blind hag, symbol of death, who drags Leah into the diabolic rhythm, the dialogue of Hanan's spirit with the bride, the Messenger's revelation to her of the "Dybbuk," the rite over her mother's tomb, the bride's transfiguration, possessed of the demon, and her repudiation of the new groom.

Act III takes place in the house of the great Rabbi Ezriel of Miropol. Sender has brought the wretched girl to him in the hope of a miracle which may free her of the Dybbuk, but the Messenger has revealed the father's sordid betrayal of the pact. The jury of the Thorá condemns him to give half his possessions to the poor. The rabbi then prepares an elaborate ceremony, with the synagogue dignitaries, the Sacred Ark, the candelabra of seven candles



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and the seven trumpets of the rite; he works himself into a spasm of fury and blasts forth the scathing exorcisms of the Israelitic liturgy, invoking the power of God to drive the spirit from the girl's body. He at length succeeds and falls prostrated.

FROM afar is heard a canticle sung by Hanan, whose soul now wanders in the void. Leah falls into an ultramundane trance. Hanan's aura on the wall becomes almost corporate. The lovers evoke tender visions of the earthly happiness they had dreamed; they sing a lullaby to cradle the children that might have been born to them. Leah at length expires, but a white ghostly emanation from her body is united with Hanan's aura. The celestial voices sing hosannas over the union and the triumph of divine law.

Rocca (Turin, 1895) is not an unknown quantity to music lovers, since various of his works have been performed in New York since the war. He had resolved to abandon opera since writing his "In Terra di Leggenda" seven years ago, but the temptation was too strong for him. His setting of "Il Dibuk" fortunately proves him to have been right in returning to the stage, since in this field he had already given strong indications of theatrical talent. It places him side by side with Cicognini and Dalla Piccola as one of the front rank promises among Italy's younger generation of composers.

His musical underscoring averages very high: vigorous characterization, masterly genre scenes, incisive, adherent discourse in richly varied melodic declamation, a robust but sober orchestral web properly subservient, suggestive Hebraic thematic material ably developed, and a dramatic stress that is not rhetorical emphasis, but deep feeling. He has rendered especially well the spectral, tragic, elegiacal and grotesque aspects of the book.

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