

# The Art of Hebrew Music

## LAZARE SAMINSKY'S NOTABLE STUDY

By KATE FLUXMAN

MISS KATE FLUXMAN, the writer of the following article, is the holder of the H. B. Webb Gift Research Scholarship, which she was recently awarded by the Witwatersrand University for research in Hebrew music. This was the first occasion on which a post-graduate scholarship was awarded to a music student by the Witwatersrand University, and the first time in South Africa that such a scholarship has been awarded for research in Hebrew music.



LAZARE SAMINSKY

DURING the past fifty years there has been among composers a growing tendency to incorporate in their works the native national idiom. It is therefore not surprising to find that this new national enthusiasm has begun to infect composers of the Jewish race. Here, however, the Jewish composer is faced with a peculiar task. Whereas composers of other nations have but to turn to the stream of folk-song that has grown and developed, though perhaps unheeded, alongside of their art-music, the Jew, with no national home of his own for nearly 2,000 years, with no natural soil from which this expression of the soul of a people might arise, is confronted with the Herculean task of wading through the morass of choking weeds which have entangled themselves round a music which lost its uniform nationality when the Jews ceased to be a nation.

For this renaissance of the art of Hebrew music, it is essential that intensive research be made into what has remained of the old Hebrew melos, in order to place at the disposal of the composer national material which can be woven into the new Hebrew works. By very slow degrees, the literature on the subject has been growing, bringing to the world in general, and the Jew in particular, some knowledge of the fine old art of Hebrew song; and just as we regard with no little disdain the man who shamefacedly admits that he has never heard of Bach or Beethoven, just so will we come to regard every Jew who has not at least some idea of the music and art of his own people.

### Clear Picture of Hebrew Music.

ONE of the most recent additions to the literature on this subject is Mr. Lazare Saminsky's *Music of the Ghetto and the Bible*.\* This book is, as the author himself says, no technical work. To the student of the subject, it is no text book, but it presents to the average reader a clear and interesting picture of Hebrew music past, present and future, destroying the illusion that anything Hebrew, particularly Hebrew music,

is something musty and fossilised—something meant only for the bent-backed, dim-eyed student of ancient lore. It is undoubtedly one of those works that are helping to make our music a living reality, stirring the imagination of the composer, and arousing the interest of the nation in the resurrection of its own musical soul.

The book is divided into seven parts, of which five deal generally with the various phases of Hebrew music. The *leit-motif* of the entire work lies in the words—"a categorical and forceful return to the old Hebrew melos." Mr. Saminsky explains the difficult position of the Western Jewish composer who, as a Jew, is "tapping the dark springhead of a new tonal current, supposedly the domain of his race," which is actually alien to him; and who, as a Western artist, has already "tasted of the highest technical and creative achievement of cultured art," and willy-nilly shrinks from the "aesthetic suffocation" that menaces him in his own racial task. In tracing briefly the history of Hebrew music, Mr. Saminsky makes a bad mistake by discussing the modes of the ancient Hebrew chant. The study of modes is a highly technical one, and consequently entirely out of place in a book of this nature. Modes cannot be dealt with *en passant*; they must be dealt with thoroughly or not at all. In this book, the discussion on modes is meaningless and confusing to the layman, incomplete and worthless to the student. Mr. Saminsky would have been well-advised to refer that whole matter to Prof. A. Z. Idelsohn's more technical works, to which he is continually referring.

Of particular interest is the account of the formation of the various Jewish folk-song societies, especially that of the disciples of Rimsky-Korsakov, leader of the great Russian "Five," who spoke very hopefully and confidently of the po-

tentialities of a great Hebrew national music-revival.

Mr. Saminsky's differentiation between the Judaic and the Hebraic in music, although very interestingly set out and logically evolved, is not very convincing. Incidentally this differentiation has been attacked and criticised in the Paris press by the eminent M. Leon Algasi. The Hebraic, according to Mr. Saminsky's classification, is proud and lofty—the age-old biblical chant emanating from the racial mind; the Judaic is full of ornate and trite orientalism, the idiom of folk-song born in the ghetto, picked up in the highways and bye-ways of the world, and invested in national garb. He seems to suggest that in the works of every Jewish composer Judaic elements are to be found, whether they wish it or not, whereas the Hebraic may or may not exist. He amplifies this later where he deals with Mendelssohn, Meyerbeer, and Rubinstein individually showing that their music will not survive them long, because they were mere "brilliant builders of an imitative art." There are, he says, distinct Judaic elements in all three, but they have failed to incorporate in their music a living soul, the soul of the Hebraic. These views are undoubtedly interesting and provoking even though they are not unassailable.

### An Anomaly.

SO far, so good. But suddenly something seems to have gone radically wrong. After flourishing aloft the torch for a pure Hebraic music, stripped of its borrowed plumes and enveloping decay, Mr. Saminsky announces, with no little pride, that the fine chorales of Bach, Handel, Arcadelt, Purcell and Palestrina—together with various traditional songs—precede the *Olenu l'Shabeach* in the service which he conducts in Temple Emanu-El in New York. That Saminsky should become a keen protagonist of reform is not surprising when we realise, as he points out, that American Synagogue music is an insipid mixture of borrowed European and Eastern Jewish traditional songs, second-rate church music, and a thin layer of so-called American Hebrew religious music; but it is utterly incomprehensible that he, of all people, should sponsor—and, even boast of—wholesale borrowing. It is even more incomprehensible when, in the same breath, he denounces his predecessor at the Temple Emanu-El—Mr. Max Spicker—for using a *Kedusha* built on a motive taken from Wagner's "Rienzi", and even making a proud note of it in his service.

It is especially amazing that Mr. Saminsky should take up this con-

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\*"MUSIC OF THE GHETTO AND THE BIBLE," By Lazare Saminsky. New York. Block Publishing Company, Ltd.

# A Beautiful Pastoral Idyll

## THE BOOK OF RUTH, WHICH IS READ ON SHEVUOTH

THE custom of reading the Book of Ruth during the services on the festival of Shevuoth is of great antiquity. This idyllic prose-poem, in which a picture is drawn of ancient Hebrew life in times of peace and plenty, describing in such beautiful detail the harvest season in ancient Judaea, was appropriately chosen to be read on the day commemorating the harvest. This was the primary significance of Shevuoth as its designated in the Bible as "The Festival of the Harvest." The notable event of that little book, the attachment of Ruth to her mother-in-law, Naomi, and her famous declaration whereby she professed to become a member of the Jewish people and an adherent of the Jewish religion, was interpreted as conversion to Judaism and this was the additional reason for the reading of this story on Shevuoth, when it assumed the second significance, that of the commemoration of the great revelation at Mount Sinai.

While in general antagonistic to proselytism, the Rabbis beheld in Ruth the righteous proselyte and held her up as model to all women who wished to embrace Judaism. The reluctance with which Naomi viewed Ruth's desertion of her home and early surroundings and the arguments which she used to dissuade her from taking that step are still further elaborated in the Midrash. She was told by Naomi of the many difficulties connected with the observance of the Jewish law, of the rigidity of the morality practised among Jews, of the many disadvantages that would confront her by renouncing her former religion and people, but Ruth was firm in her resolve. Naomi still hesitated and it was only when Ruth exclaimed: "Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God," that Naomi consented to have Ruth follow her to Canaan. Ruth's devotion to the minute practises of the Jewish law and her purity and chastity won for her the love and admiration of Boaz. Ruth followed Naomi's instructions explicitly and it was thus that she was able to maintain herself and her purity in the midst of the many temptations with which she was beset while out in the field gleaning. Although the Biblical law prohibits intermarriage with Amonites or Moab-

ites (Deuteronomy 23: 4), even to the tenth generation, the Rabbis make this apply only to the males of these tribes, but not to the females, so that the marriage of Boaz and Ruth was entirely within the Jewish law. The other relative of Naomi, nearer of kin, did not know of this distinction and, therefore, refused to marry Ruth, but Boaz was conversant with the law and was ready to enter into the compact as soon as he heard of the refusal of the nearest relative, who had the first claim on Elimelech's property, if he had consented to marry Ruth. This was in accordance with an ancient custom in Israel, probably antedating the law of the levirate marriage given in Deuteronomy 25: 5-10, although the symbolic ceremony of the renunciation of certain rights is similar in both cases.

### Intrinsic Beauty.

Whether the purpose of the book is that assumed by modern critics to have been in the form of a protest against Ezra's activity in eradicating all intermarriage, or whether it was to indicate the humble origin of King David, the story has enough intrinsic worth and beauty to make its frequent perusal and study delightful and beneficial. A quiet, peaceful atmosphere pervades the narrative. It pictures the husbandman at his work, after the labour of ploughing and sowing has begun to manifest its results in the products of the soil. It further elucidates the practical working of the charity laws of ancient Israel, the provisions made for the support of the poor and the needy at the time when God's blessings have been showered upon the landowner. Ruth was one of the many landless poor who found sustenance and support, both for herself and her aged mother-in-law, from the ears of corn that the reapers let drop on the ground or from the corners of the field, which they were not supposed to harvest. It was through the practise of these laws that the rich farmer was constantly reminded of the fact that he was not the sole master of his possessions and that the blessings that came to him must be shared by him with those who were less fortunate. The romantic side of the story also reveals the high standards of morality prevalent in Israel even at that early age.

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tradictory view when we consider that he himself holds Wagner to be undeniably a Jew. In one part of the book he sets out to prove that Wagner was a Jew. Yet this same Richard Wagner attacked everything and everyone Jewish—as witness the violent negation of any creative ability among the Jewish people which rings in every page of his *Das Judenthum in der Musik*. Wagner's music is so intensely German that Dr. Vaughan Williams rightly says it raises "to its highest power all that is best in the national consciousness of his own country." His own country is Germany. There is nothing Jewish about this man Wagner, nor is there anything Jewish about his music. Jews should be loth to claim as their own a man such as he was, instead of searching obscure corners to find one little fact to which to tie their belief. There is undeniably a much-to-be-deplored tendency to make Jews of the most impossible people, simply because they have some achievement or other to their credit. Saminsky even goes so far as to suggest that Guido d'Arezzo was also a Jew. All this is purposeless, and adds nothing to our national prestige. In this particular chapter Mr. Saminsky's logic has definitely "jumped the rails." According to him, Richard Wagner must have been Jewish because he felt and attacked the Jewish menace—it was a natural reaction against his own Jewishness! Because Beethoven and others who neither felt nor attacked this "menace" were not Jews, therefore Wagner, who did, must have been a Jew!

Yet this particular section is only one small part of a much larger work, and in other parts Mr. Saminsky undeniably excels himself. His description of the Synagogue and services of the Near East—Tiflis, Constantinople, and Jerusalem—is magnificent. It is undoubtedly the finest passage of the book. His personal observations are invaluable, and prove fascinating and instructive reading. The entire work is well-written and very readable, and—with the exception of one or two bad lapses—expresses some very sound and informative views. The chapter on Biblical Melody is of great interest although Mr. Saminsky has dealt with the subject somewhat sketchily. His replies to Dr. Julius Engel's attacks, moreover, would have proved much more interesting, had Mr. Saminsky reproduced the text of Dr. Engel's criticism. As they stand, they are of very little value.

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