

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.

