



**AN AMERICAN *DYBBUK* OF OUR TIME:
THE OPERA IN YIDDISH BY SOLOMON EPSTEIN**

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English Translation by Solomon Epstein

NOTE: *This article is the English translation of a book chapter from: Aloma Bardi, Esotismi musicali del Dibbuk. Ispirazioni da un soggetto del folklore ebraico (Musical Exoticisms of the Dybbuk: Inspirations from a Theme of Jewish Folklore), Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale” - Archivio di Studi Ebraici, directed by Professor Giancarlo Lacerenza, Napoli 2014, Part III, Chapter 2, pp. 162-183. The volume analyzes different musical adaptations (by Yoel Engel, Aaron Copland, Lodovico Rocca, David Tamkin, Leonard Bernstein, Solomon Epstein, and others) of S. An-Ski’s powerful play, Der Dybuk (1914). This translation by Dr. Solomon Epstein from the original Italian is gratefully published by special arrangement with the University of Naples and the Series Director, Professor Giancarlo Lacerenza. –Aloma Bardi*

The Dybbuk: An Opera in Yiddish in Three Acts

Composed by Solomon Epstein

***Libretto adapted by the composer
from the original Yiddish playscript
by S. Ansky
(Shloimeh Zanvel Rapaport)***

PIANO-VOCAL SCORE

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At a time of renewed international interest in the drama *Der Dybuk* by S. An-Ski, when numerous stagings and musical adaptations were produced in the U.S.A., Israel and other countries,¹ in the 1990's the United States composer Solomon Epstein wrote an operatic *Dybbuk* to a libretto in Yiddish, which constitutes an original and unique case in the panorama of contemporary American—and international—musical theater. *The Dybbuk: An Opera in Yiddish in Three Acts* (1997) is still unpublished² and still not performed complete.³

A production of *The Dybbuk* by Epstein premièred in Israel, on April 28, 1999, at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beersheba; and at the Suzanne Dellal Centre for Dance and Theatre in Tel Aviv, on May 2, 1999.⁴

On those occasions, the opera was presented in an abridged version, consisting of selections from the score without orchestra (using the composer's piano-vocal reduction). Conducted by Ronen Borshevsky, with the virtuoso pianist Irit Rub-Levi at the keyboard, the Swedish soprano Camilla Griehsel in the role of Leah, and the Israeli tenor Josef Almog Aridan in the role of Khonnon, and in a remarkable basic staging directed by Rachel Michaeli, this production was videotaped live on May 2, 1999.⁵

The reduced version privileges the solo scenes of principal characters, omitting for the most part the appearances of the secondary characters; although thoughtfully

¹ Among the numerous musical adaptations produced in the climate of renewed interest in An-Ski's drama we mention: *Between Two Worlds (The Dybbuk), Opera in Two Acts*, by Shulamit Ran to a libretto by Charles Kondek, 1995, premièred in Chicago, 1997; *The Dybbuk*, libretto and music by Jerrold Morgulas, 1995, premièred in New York, 1999; *The Dybbuk: A Multimedia Chamber Opera in Three Acts*, opera and incidental music, libretto (in Hebrew and English) and music by Ofer Ben-Amots, premièred in Tel Aviv and Los Angeles in 2002, and in Montreal in 2008. We also mention *A Dybbuk: Possessed*, by the Klezmatics, incidental music for the textual adaptation by Tony Kushner, Hartford 1995. For a complete list of other musical adaptations in various times and places, see the Appendix.

² *The Dybbuk: An opera in Yiddish in Three Acts*. Libretto and music: Solomon Epstein (United States, 1939-2018), "Adapted by the composer from the original Yiddish playscript by S. Ansky (Shloimeh Zanel Rapaport)"; composed 1998; orchestra score and piano-vocal reduction unpublished, in the private archive of the composer (Agawam, Massachusetts, U.S.A.); for orchestra with piano and 7 shofars, and an offstage "klezmer band"; also includes 15-20 dancers; the duration of the complete opera in three acts is about 2 hours and 20 minutes.

³ Premièred in an abridged version without orchestra (voices accompanied by pianoforte): Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, April 28, 1999, and Tel Aviv, May 2, 1999.

⁴ The staging and the video production were supported by the Avraham Lerner Foundation for Yiddish Language and Culture, which also financed at the time the programs of Yiddish study at the most important Israeli universities.

⁵ In 2005 it became possible to order the DVD of the performance online, subtitled in English and Hebrew.

and coherently selected, such abridged version inevitably confers on *The Dybbuk* the dimensions of a chamber opera, which in fact it is not.⁶

Also there was a public presentation of the DVD of this performance in the U.S., with the author’s participation and with his personal explanation of the complex use of traditional motives incorporated into the compositional texture of the opera.⁷

Solomon Epstein himself, a passionate expert of 19th- and 20th-Century musical theater, particularly Italian opera, adapted the literary source of An-Ski in order to elaborate an operatic libretto.

Among the numerous “original” versions of the drama (in Russian; in An-Ski’s Yiddish version, lost; in Hebrew, by Bialik; in An-Ski’s reconstructed second version)⁸ Epstein’s choice privileges the Yiddish version, characterized by a controversial genesis and history, still object of debate by specialists.

The composer is guided by an unwavering instinct as an opera librettist who confronts language as an expressive tool of communication at all levels, and as a vehicle for a powerful drama, following a practice by this time widely consigned to oblivion and even unknown in contemporary musical theater. The original choice of a libretto in Yiddish—a language once greatly diffused among the Jewish population, then condemned to extermination by the Shoah, in later times a survivor among reduced and dismembered communities, and finally newly recuperated in recent communities,

⁶ The duration of the DVD is 70 minutes. The shortening of the opera in this performance omits, for example, Scenes 1 and 2 of Act I, passing from the prologue directly to Scene 3.

⁷ At the Meyerhoff Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Maryland (College Park, Maryland) on October 27 and 28, 2012, there was presented the Festival *Demons, Devils and Dybbuks in Jewish Folklore*, a project developed by the Professor of Yiddish, Agi Legutko. During these events, there was a showing of the DVD of Epstein’s *Dybbuk*, preceded by an introduction by the composer, in which he illustrated several of the Russian-Jewish themes integrated into the composition of the opera. Also, Epstein participated in a panel of artists who had realized adaptations of An-Ski’s drama in the sphere of various scenic arts (modern theatrical versions, dance, film, puppet theater). These artists participated in a discussion of the reasons for their fascination with the theme of *The Dybbuk* and the modality of their works, each one in their own specific field.

⁸ On the versions of the drama and its diverse originals, see Giancarlo Lacerenza, *Dibbuk ebraico. Edizione critica e traduzione annotate [The Dybbuk in Hebrew: Critical edition and annotated translation]*, Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale”, Centro di Studi Ebraici, Napoli 2012, Introduction, pp. 7-11. See also Luisa Passerini, *Storie d’amore e d’Europa [Stories of Love and of Europe]*, Chapter “Tra due mondi”; il “Dibuk” di An-Ski in Francia e in Italia [*Between two worlds: “The Dybbuk” of An-Ski in France and Italy*], pp. 234-235.

particularly around the 1990’s—is above all an assertion of a linguistic and poetic heritage rescued from extinction, and a strong will to create an accessible opera on the thread of memory, thanks to the evocative power of music.

As the text is in Yiddish, so is the music of *The Dybbuk* by Solomon Epstein populated by traditional Russian-Jewish motives, whose interweaving reveals its profound belonging and its design of cultural re-enactment:

My purpose with this opera goes beyond the normal desire of any composer for recognition. Just as S. An-Ski wrote his famous play to make audiences aware of a way of life that was already disappearing in his own day, so in principle I composed this opera to connect opera audiences anywhere to a powerful emotional experience of a 1,000-year-old Jewish civilization which the Third Reich fully intended to wipe all memory of from the face of the earth. For that purpose, I have an advantage not available even to An-Ski: I have woven a host of traditional Russian-Jewish music used both motivically and melodically into the larger musical fabric of this opera.⁹

The Yiddish language had been frequently used in comedy, songs and performances of popular music shows,¹⁰ but until now not in opera; which increases the affirmative force of Epstein’s *Dybbuk*. Nevertheless, in order not to confine his work within the limits of “authenticity” which could run the risk of appearing dogmatic, the composer has also prepared a singable rhythmic English version¹¹ as an “extreme” solution to facilitate performance in cases where Yiddish is not practicable.

The Dybbuk also contains textual insertions in Biblical Hebrew, when *Shir-Hashirim* is intoned by Khonnon as a citation (and almost a physical presence) of the venerable text of the *Song of Songs* in Scene 3 and Scene 5 of Act I, producing a powerful effect on the dramaturgy of the opera. In Scene 3, Khonnon is surprised by his friend Hennokh, who is also a student in the Yeshiva, as he is immersed in the study of Kabbalistic rituals; while Hennokh is exhorting him to turn anew to the wisdom of the Talmud, Khonnon bursts forth with the *Song of Songs*, which represents the utmost exaltation of love desire redeemed by the purifying flames.

⁹ Solomon Epstein, e-mail correspondence with the Author, June 28, 2012.

¹⁰ Comedy, operetta and popular shows in Yiddish have been part of the theatrical experience also in the United States.

¹¹ Unpublished manuscript, The ICAMus Archive – The Solomon Epstein collection.

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HENNOKH

Zint hawt bashahfen nit Gawt,
nawr di "Sitraw Akhraw"!

Sin was not fashioned by G-d,
but the "Hidden Aspect"!

KHONNON

Un ver hawt di "Sitraw Akhraw"
beshahfen, oikh Gawt?
Vawsser zint iz di shtawrk-steh?
Vawsser zint iz shverer?....

And who gave the "Hidden Aspect"
existence, but G-d?
Of all sins which is strongest?
Of all sins which is harshest?....

HENNOKH

....Kedushaw? In der "Siraw Akhraw"?
....Ikh ken nit!

.... Transcendence? In the "Hidden
Aspect"?....I don't know...

KHONNON

...Vi altz m'-na-tsay-akh tsu zein?
Di zint fun a glustung tsu a nekayvaw?
Yaw?

...Of all of them hardest to conquer?
The sin of passion for a woman?
Yes?

HENNOKH

Lawz mir betrakhten!.....Yaw.

Let me consider!.....Yes.

KHONNON

Un az mi laytert awt di zint
in a shtarken fei-er,
vert fun der gresster tumaw
di hekhsteh kedushaw:
vert "Shir Ha-Shirim".

But if one purifies that sin
in a mighty fire,
then from debased corruption
emerges the holy:
the "Song of Songs".

"Shir Ha-Shirim:
Hinawkh yawfaw ra-yaw-si,
hinawkh yawfaw;
ay-na-yikh yonim mibahd
l'-tsa-maw-saykh.

"Song of Songs:
Thou art beautiful, O my love,
thou art beautiful;
thine eyes are doves
behind thy veil.

" Sahraykh k'-ayder ha-i-zim
sheh-gawl-shu may-har gil-ahd,
(LEYEH ENTERS ahead of her companions and stands staring at KHONNON,
who does not yet notice her.)

"Thy hair is like a flock of goats
trailing down from Mount Gilead,

"Shi-na-yikh k'-ayder ha-k'-tsuvos
sheh-aw-lu min ha-ra-khe-tzaw,
sheh-ku-lawm masimoss,
v'-sha-ku-law ayn baw-hem."

Thy teeth are like flocks of white sheep
that ascend from the washing,
and all of them perfectly paired,
and perfection reigns among them."

In Scene 5, the young man repeats the chanting of *Shir-Hashirim* following his encounter with Leah and the exchange of a silent promise through their glances. In this scene, the everyday language and the elevated language of holiness stand out when

juxtaposed with expressive efficacy and considerable prominence in a sung text, given their great sonorous diversity; and the musical style expresses with maximum adherence the dramatic contrast of this passage, the text of which we can read in another significant page of the libretto:¹²

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FRADEH (to LEYEH)

Nu, tekhterel, genug. A hayligeh Toireh tawr men lahng nit kushen. Reinigkeiten zenen dokh geshriben mit shvartsen fei-er oif veissen fei-er. Oi, vi shpett ess iz, vi shpett! Kumt, tekhterlekh, ahaym, kumt gikher ahaym!	Now then, my child, enough. A Holy Torah one should kiss but briefly. Holy Torahs have their letters written with blackest fire on whitest fire. Oh, how late it is, how late! Come, daughters, come home, Come quickly, come home!
--	--

(the WOMEN leave hurriedly. MAYER puts away the Torah Scroll,
closes the Ark, and hurries after them.)

SCENE FIVE

KHONNON

(picks up the Song of Songs chant where he had left off previously
in Scene Three upon seeing LEYEH gazing at him.)

"...K'-khut ha-shaw-ni sif-saw-sah-yikh, u-mid-baw-raykh naw-veh; K'-fe-lakh ha-ri-mon ra-kaw-saykh mi-bahd l'-tsa-maw-saykh."	"...Thy mouth is a thread of scarlet, and all thy words breathe loveliness; Vermillion are the pomegranates of thy temples under thy veils."
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HENNOKH

Khonnon...vaws zingstu? Dei-neh pay-ess zenen nahss. Bist nawr vaws vider geven a mikveh?	What's that...you're chanting? Both your earlocks are all wet. You're still observing ritual immersions?
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KHONNON

Yaw.	Yes.
------	------

HENNOKH

Un du...hawst kayn moireh nit?	And you...have no fear of this?
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KHONNON

Nayn.	No.
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¹² Solomon Epstein, *The Dybbuk*. Libretto adapted by the composer from the play by S. An-Sky in the original Yiddish; singable English translation by the composer; complete synopsis of the opera and complete bilingual libretto; © Copyright 1998 by Solomon Epstein. Act I, Scene 3, p. 8 and Act I, Scene 5, p. 13 of libretto.

The events and the dramaturgy of An-Ski’s *Dybbuk* in the operatic adaptation by Solomon Epstein receive a culturally motivated treatment within the practice and tradition of libretto-writing. In the reduction of the text so as to obtain greater conciseness, An-Ski’s secondary sub-plots are eliminated.

By privileging the musical function, for example, are removed all references to the backstory concerning the oath by the then-young Sender and Nissen, to marry off their children (an event which instead other composers¹³ have preferred to include for the purpose of increasing dramatic significance through temporal depth).

Instead, in accordance with Epstein’s choice, from the perspective of an opera—different than spoken theater—Sender’s greed for riches is sufficient explanation as to why he refuses Khonnon as a spouse for his young daughter.

Also for the same reason, the character of Reb Shimshon, the rabbi of the city, is not present in *The Dybbuk: An Opera in Yiddish*. This choice is also dictated by an essentially operatic reason: according to Solomon Epstein, a Verdi baritone (in the part of Reb Azrielkeh) is already sufficient to the balance, the logic and the resources of an opera cast.¹⁴

Intentions of dramaturgical economy and facilitation of staging are thus woven into the overall original choice of the composer-librettist.

One of the most significant examples of the aim of conciseness according to theatrical practice is shown above all in Epstein’s *Dybbuk* by the absence of a chorus as a formalized presence.

¹³ For example, as we have seen, Leonard Bernstein in the ballet *Dybbuk*; we have also observed before how the backstory was incorporated into the scenario of *Der Dibek* (1937) of Michal Waszynski.

¹⁴ “I merely followed common practice in adapting a literary source for musical setting as an opera libretto. I cut S. An-Ski’s text drastically, because music takes so much longer than words, and I did not want an 8-hour opera. Further, I drastically simplified S. An-Ski’s play by cutting entire sub-plots, which are important in S. An-Ski’s spoken drama, but impossibly wordy and complicated in an opera, where the music carries the main meaning. The most obvious cut is the entire backstory of the vow between Sender ben Henye and Nissen ben Rivkeh that, if their wives give birth to children of opposite sexes, then those two children shall marry. This is impossible in an opera where first of all it would add another act (or more), and also it is simply too verbal and too complicated for musical treatment. Instead, I simply substituted Sender’s greed for wealth as sufficient motivation for Sender’s willfull failure to recognize and inquire about Khonnon. I also eliminated Reb Shimshon, “the Rabbi of the City”. He would simply stop the forward momentum of the music (and the drama) cold. Reb Azrielkeh (a “Verdi baritone”) was entirely sufficient for operatic purposes.” (Solomon Epstein, e-mail correspondence with the Author, March 22, 2013.)

Nevertheless, though not using choral participation in a characteristic manner (as a visible mass which moves on stage, sings, acts and wears costumes) this opera remains a forceful ritual and choral work in being attuned to the original inspiration of An-Ski.

In the Prologue and Epilogue, which most significantly involve chorality, the verses on the fall of the soul to the depth of the abyss which contains in itself the essence of redemption, are intoned in unison, in *pianissimo legato* and "without accents" by a symbolic invisible chorus positioned behind the scene ("from a great distance"), made up of the basses and bass-baritones, among whom are the principal soloists.¹⁵

In addition, the singers performing the secondary parts double their characters, playing two in two different scenes. While the six principal parts call for six solo singers, the eleven secondary parts are taken by seven artists. For example, the performers of the roles of the Three Batlonim (lyric tenor, character tenor, bass-baritone) also impersonate respectively Menasheh (the fiancé of Leah), Reb Mendel (Menasheh's tutor) and Nachman (the father of Menasheh). This appears in the list of characters and voice types in the score.

The economy of scenic means reaches expressive levels that bring Epstein's opera closer not solely to the evoked ritual context, but also to a popular conception of music theater.

His dramaturgical choices project memories of past operatic traditions, of a time when it was possible to set up a production even with modest means. Such a recollection of "poverty" and practical staging requirements, which places this work within the sphere of influence of both the folklore collected by An-Ski and traditional opera, is mainly focused towards communication: an opera is created to be performed and staged in front of an audience, as it was meant to be, and to this end it adapts without suffering alterations to its identity.

¹⁵ Solomon Epstein, *The Dybbuk: An Opera in Yiddish in Three Acts*, 1997, Piano-Vocal Score, *Prelude to Act One*, mm. 170-187, pp. 16-18 and *Postlude*, mm. 2550-2570, pp. 323-326.

The Dybbuk: An Opera In Yiddish

CAST LIST

PRINCIPAL ROLES:

LEAH.....soprano, lirico spinto ("Cio-Cio San")
FRIEDA.....true contralto
KHONNON..... tenor, lirico spinto ("Cavaradossi")
REB AZRIEL'KEH (Act Three only).....high dramatic baritone ("Verdi baritone")
SENDER, father of Leah.....bass-baritone
THE MESSENGER.....basso profondo ("Russian bass")

SECONDARY ROLES, WITH DOUBLINGS:

GITTEL, friend of LEAH.....soprano (soubrette)
BASYEH, friend of LEAH.....soprano (soubrette)
HENNOKH (Act I)/ MIKHOL (Act III).....lyric tenor
FIRST BATLON (Acts I, II)/ MENASHEH (Act II).....lyric tenor
SECOND BATLON (Act I, II)/ REB MENDEL.....character tenor
THIRD BATLON (Act I, II)/ NAKHMAN, father of MENASHEH (Act II).....
..... bass-baritone
MAYER, synagogue assistant.....buffo tenor

[NOTE: Solo basses and bass-baritones sing unison melody OFFSTAGE for Prologue and Epilogue]

Dancers: Seven men who blow Shofars at Exorcism

Rabbinical students, Sender's hangers-on, Wedding guests, Men at Exorcism Ritual

In adherence to the vision of An-Ski—and as befits an operatic work that contains the entire gamut of dramatic expression—in *The Dybbuk* dance is also very important. In this context, the dance scenes are distinguished by the absence of a folklore that could be expected, even though stripped of decorative exoticism.

The *Chassidic Circle Dance* of Act I, Scene 6, which makes prominent by contrast the tragic death of Khonnon, and is brutally interrupted upon the discovery of his corpse, comes to prefigure the sound of the Shofar in the *Exorcism Scene* of Act III.¹⁶

Of remarkable theatrical power is the percussive *Dance of Leyeh with the Poor* in Act II, Scene 2, in *Allegro furioso (fortissimo, staccato)*¹⁷ which is followed by the bizarre *Danse Macabre*, at first hypnotic and ecstatic, swollen with tremolos, trills, and glissandi; all ornamentation which in dissonant acceleration assumes an alienating role, parodistic and tragic.¹⁸ These sections of the opera would certainly enrich the theatrical impact of a complete scenic performance.¹⁹

Awareness of the operatic heritage contributes to the definition of the identity of this *Dybbuk* in Yiddish. In composing, Solomon Epstein feels himself part of a community of opera composers and at the same time of opera lovers, the audience. Opera as a popular, beloved genre, for a long time has been deeply rooted in individual and collective memory. With such a community, and in particular with Verdi, a profound source of influence and model of reference, Epstein entertains a constant conversation: Since my childhood, for me the center of Italian opera is of course Verdi. So I can see that, almost reflexively, I structured my opera along the lines of *Otello*: Verdi's erasure of the demarcation between recitative and aria (or other set pieces) by creating a continuous 'spectrum' ranging flexibly from Iago's nearly secco recitative in his early scene with Roderigo; through parlante, which can explode into arioso and aria, all the way to a complete stop-action full-scale ensemble at the end of Act III.²⁰

¹⁶ Solomon Epstein, *The Dybbuk*, Piano-Vocal Score, unpublished manuscript; © Copyright 1997 by Solomon Epstein; page 105 (death of Khonnon); pp. 110-113 (Dance).

¹⁷ Solomon Epstein, *The Dybbuk*, Piano-Vocal Score, unpublished manuscript; © Copyright 1997 by Solomon Epstein, pp.126-131.

¹⁸ Solomon Epstein, *The Dybbuk*, Piano-Vocal Score, unpublished manuscript; © Copyright 1997 by Solomon Epstein, pp. 132-135.

¹⁹ In the only visual and sound document of the opera, which lasts 70 minutes, the presence of the dance is reduced for reasons of simplification.

²⁰ Solomon Epstein, e-mail correspondence with the Author, September 23, 2012.

Libretto adapted by the composer from S. Ansky. **THE DYBBUK: ACT 2, scene 2: PIANO FOUR HANDS** music by Solomon Epstein. **Dance of the Poor with the Bride**

1063 Allegro furioso *sfff*

1063 Allegro furioso *sfff* (use fist: imitate bass drum)

1064 *sfff* (slap 8va with palm)

1065 *sfff* (fist)

1065 *sfff* (use fist)

1065 *sfff* (fist)

1065 *smp* (use fist)

1065 *p*

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Dybbuk Piano-Vocal Score, Act II, Scene 2: p. 126, Dance of the Poor with the Bride [piano 4 hands], mm. 1063-1068.

The appeal to communication, reconnecting *The Dybbuk* to the past and to all traditions—be it the folkloristic and musical world, recovered, preserved and depicted by An-Ski, or be it the operatic universe—is welded and interwoven into the theme of memory and of compositional influence: Epstein grafts into his opera a great quantity (a sort of “repertory”) of traditional Russian-Jewish chants.²¹ Such sources, that amount to dozens, are selected because they are suited to the dramatic situations of the subject.

In the complex design of *The Dybbuk*, these pre-existing musical materials are not used as picturesque ornaments, but rather function as thematic and motivic components, and as such they influence, even mold, the language and the style.

Also when motifs and melodies are created directly by the author, in response to the stimulus of An-Ski’s drama, all elements are still shaped following the characteristic scales and interval models typical of traditional Jewish music. Such a compositional procedure contributes greatly to the unification of the style, resulting in realism and involvement.

Solomon Epstein has prepared a Chart of original musical sources which he used as thematic and motivic elements.²² The document, a creative manual and at the same time a musical diary, constitutes at first glance a fascinating labyrinth subjected by the author to uninterrupted clarification; but with study, it quickly reveals its nature of a comprehensive guide to the opera’s genesis and poetic qualities.

The chart is testimony above all to the conviction, and at the same time, the global cultural project of the composer of re-engagement with a world well-known to him, familiar and loved, which must be rescued from extermination and oblivion. But the exotic colors filling the chart-diary are never in Epstein’s *Dybbuk* merely picturesque and decorative, nor does the intellectual force of this learned construction weaken its theatricality or communication.

²¹ Solomon Epstein had a long professional career of Cantor in Various United States synagogues.

²² Solomon Epstein, *The Dybbuk: An Opera in Yiddish. Chart of Traditional Russian-Jewish Source Music Used in the Opera Melodically and Motivically*, unpublished manuscript, 11 pp., © 2012 by Solomon Epstein.

The Dybbuk:

An Opera In Yiddish

music by Solomon Epstein

**libretto adapted by the composer
from the play by S. Anski
(Solomon Rapaport)**

CHART OF TRADITIONAL
RUSSIAN-JEWISH SOURCE
MUSIC USED IN THE OPERA
MELODICALLY AND MOTIVICALLY

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Reviewing the thematic use of traditional sources, we therefore observe that Epstein’s opera both opens and concludes with the intonation of “Makhmas vavs” (Yiddish corresponding to “Mipne-ma”).²³ Although the melody is not the traditional source used by Engel, but rather a Nusach (characteristic melody) from Ne’ilah (celebration and concluding prayer) of Yom Kippur, nevertheless a melodic, intervallic and rhythmic affinity between the two sources once again recalls the ramifications of the folkloristic musical patrimony in the vast territories of its provenance.

Similarly, the choice of other original melodies which are interwoven in the score of Epstein’s *Dybbuk* always has artistic and expressive motivations, as is also evidenced in the treatment to which they are subjected.

A particularly significant case occurs in the intonation of *Song of Songs* in Act I of the opera; the entire Scene 3²⁴ is built on two traditional Russian-Jewish chants for the *Song of Songs*, the first dominating the entire passage²⁵ which concludes with a love duet without words, in which the voice of the solo cello (alter ego of Khonnon) intersects with the voice of the solo violin (alter ego of Leyeh).

The elaboration of the original source melody is not folkloric but purely operatic. When the melody relies on the symbolic timbre of the cello-Khonnon (*Allargando poco a poco – Andante con passione*), the *Song of Songs* becomes a passionate and dramatic text, assigned to a lyric spinto tenor (“Cavaradossi”, the composer has precisely written next to the name of Khonnon in the Cast List and the corresponding vocal roles)²⁶ who thus vehemently creates a new and persuasive expressive range. The instrumental dialogue forges the transparency of the vibraphone and piano against the melody of the cello, in which the intermittent ardor of the strings pours a surge of consuming eloquence.

²³ Solomon Epstein, *The Dybbuk*, Piano-Vocal Score, unpublished manuscript; © Copyright 1997 by Solomon Epstein. Prelude, mm. 1-187, pp. 15-18; Postlude, mm. 2550-2570, pp. 323-326.

²⁴ Solomon Epstein, *The Dybbuk*, Libretto; unpublished manuscript; © Copyright 1998 by Solomon Epstein. Act I, Scene 3, pp. 6-8. Solomon Epstein, *The Dybbuk*, Piano-Vocal Score, unpublished manuscript; © Copyright 1997 by Solomon Epstein. Act I, Scene 3, mm. 296-567, pp. 37-64; pp. 109-141 of Orchestra Score.

²⁵ Up to m. 567.

²⁶ Solomon Epstein, *The Dybbuk*, Piano-Vocal Score, unpublished manuscript; © Copyright 1997 by Solomon Epstein. First non-numbered page after cover.

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Traditional Russian-Jewish musical sources used in THE DYBBUK: AN OPERA IN YIDDISH by SOLOMON EPSTEIN, with libretto adapted by the composer from the Yiddish playscript by S. ANSKI.

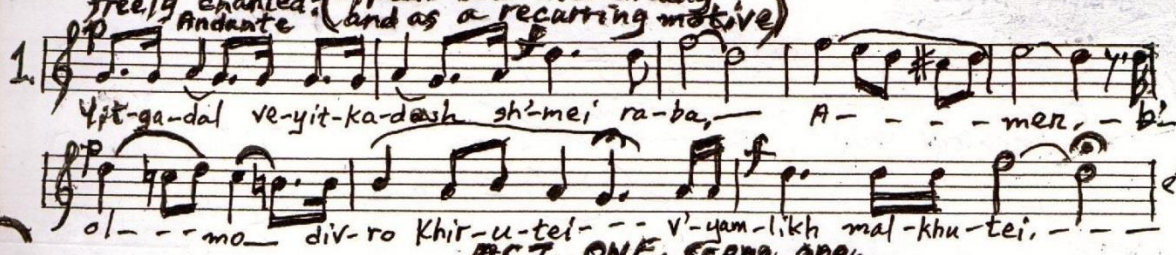
These traditional sources are adapted both melodically and motivically, and were chosen as appropriate to dramatic situations in the opera. The references below are keyed to their appearance in the opera's piano-vocal score by measure numbers.

Many of the opera's melodies and motives are not shown here because they are freely composed in response to dramatic situations, but all are shaped by characteristic Jewish scale patterns.

ACT ONE, Prelude
Nusakh [Signature Melody] for the Final Service (Ne'ilah) of Yom Kippur, with words from the High Holiday Prayer Book.

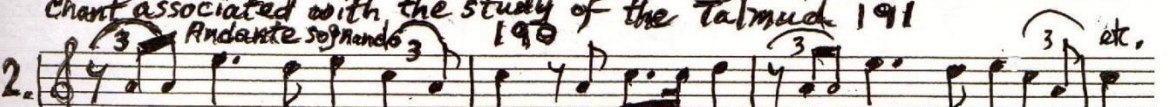
Often rhythms are approximate.

measures 144-187 (appears both melodically freely chanted: (and as a recurring motive)
Andante

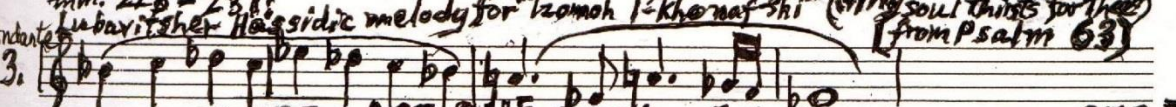
1. 
 Yit-ga-dal ve-yit-ka-dash sh'mei ra-ba, A - - - mer, - b'
 ol - - - mo - div-ro Khir-u-tei - - v'-yam-likh mal-khu-tei, - - - etc.

ACT ONE, SCENE ONE


mm. 189
 Chant associated with the study of the Talmud 191
Andante sostenuto

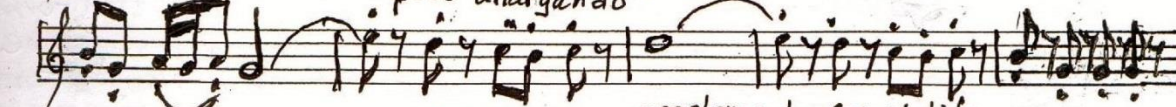
2. 
 etc.

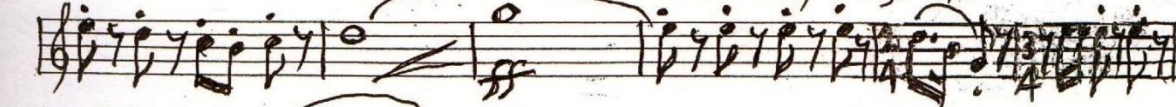
mm. 228-231
 Lubavitcher Hassidic melody for "Tzomoh l'khoraf shi" (My soul thirsts for Thee) [from Psalm 63]
Andante

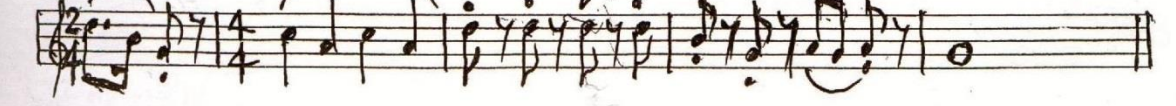
3. 

m. 265 **ACT ONE, scene two** [Also ACT ONE, scene six, *mm. 973-1002*]
 Allegro Lubavitcher Hassidic Circle Dance.
poco allargando

4. 
accelerando, con giubilo


accelerando, con giubilo


accelerando, con giubilo



ARCHIVES

mp / *non-noni*

from m. 407, the solo cello [KHONNON's alter ego] begins to assert the traditional chant for the Biblical "Song of Songs," which will dominate till the end of the scene at m. 567, closing with a "wordless Love Duet" which intertwines the solo cello with the solo violin [LEAH's alter ego].

9A and 9A are drawn from two different Russian-Jewish traditional chants for The Song of Songs.

m. 479 the "Song of Songs" chant appears in the voice, as KHONNON becomes fully conscious that the Song of Songs liberates him to transform his obsessive passion for LEAH to the plane of holiness. As he sings the Song of Songs chant for the first time, he also switches from Yiddish to Biblical Hebrew:

mp / *non-noni*

9. *shir - - ha-shi-rim - -* 510 *hi - nakh yaw-faw ra-yaw-si'ha*
 Song of Songs - 510 511 thou art beau-ti-ful O my love...

9A *sa-taykh k'ayderha - i - zim* *sheh-gal-shu - - may-har-gil-ad - -*
 Thy hair is like a flock of goats trail-ing down - - from high Mount Gil-e-ad - -

514 515 516 517

shi-na-yikh k'ayder hak-bayvos sheh-aw-lu min-hav-rakht-tzavn
 thy teeth are like flocks of white sheep that as-cend - - from the wash-ing - -

divisi *allargando poco a poco*

Vln I *divisi*

Vln II *divisi*

Vla *ff* *sp.* *fp* *sol.* *mf*

Vlc *ff* *sp.* *fp* *sol.* *mf*

D-B. *mf*

419 420 421 422

Paseantino
 NO. 31 BLANK SCORE 24 STAVE/PO 10900

The two traditional Russian-Jewish chants for the *Song of Songs* recur in varied appearances in the course of the opera: in Scene 4 of Act I, in preparation for the reprise in Scene 5; several times in Act II, markedly in the *Danse Macabre* of Scene 3; and in the final scene of Act III.²⁷

In this last occurrence, in which atonality is used, string glissandi and Sprechstimme reflect the disorientation of the two lovers.²⁸ In the following measures,²⁹ Leyeh gradually regains her memory; the chant of the *Song of Songs* appears in the orchestra and then in the voices of the two young lovers, in a final duet which leads to the death of the girl and to an eternal reunion of the unhappy couple.³⁰ The duet culminates in a supreme reappearance of the theme in the course of the final measures of Leyeh as she turns to Khonnon, just before falling dead.³¹

²⁷ Solomon Epstein, *The Dybbuk*, Act III, Scene 7.

²⁸ Solomon Epstein, *The Dybbuk*, Piano-Vocal Score, unpublished manuscript; © Copyright 1997 by Solomon Epstein. Act III, Scene 4; mm. 2379-2396, pp. 295-297.

²⁹ Solomon Epstein, *The Dybbuk*, Piano-Vocal Score, unpublished manuscript; © Copyright 1997 by Solomon Epstein. Act III, Scene 4; mm. 2397-2399, pp. 297.

³⁰ Solomon Epstein, *The Dybbuk*, Piano-Vocal Score, unpublished manuscript; © Copyright 1997 by Solomon Epstein. Act III, Scene 4; mm. 2401-2424, pp. 297-301.

³¹ Solomon Epstein, *The Dybbuk*, Piano-Vocal Score, unpublished manuscript; © Copyright 1997 by Solomon Epstein. Act III, Scene 4; mm. 2524-2538, pp. 318-321.

Picc
Fl II
ob
Cl I
Cl II
Bssn
FrHn I
FrHn II
Tpt I
Tpt II
Tympani
Perc I
Perc II
Piano
Klonhorn
Vln I (tutti)
Vln II
Vla
Vlc solo
Vlc tutti (gli altri)
D-B

sheh-ku-lawm and all of them mas-im perfectly matched

518 519 520 521

Pesantino
NO. 31 BLANK SCORE 24 STAFF/PO 10890

Solomon Epstein, *The Dybbuk*, Orchestra Score, Act I, Scene 3, p. 130, mm. 518-521; Khonnon: "Sheh-kulawm masimos" ("and all of them perfectly matched").

One more particularly complex case of the use of traditional chants in the texture of the opera is offered in the Exorcism Scene of Act III.³² The Exorcism is built musically as an inversion of the three-part Service central to the Rosh Hashanah ritual, which avails itself of the characteristic sound of the Shofar at the close of each section.

To the concept of upward movement, symbolizing the fulfillment of divine intervention so that the Israelite exiles can be conducted to the Promised Land, corresponds by contrast, in the Exorcism Ritual—a downward trajectory in three parts, announced clearly by the triple sounding of the Shofar—the invocation of the Higher Spirits all the way down to the fearsome Lower Spirits, who will in the end free the body of Leyeh from the dybbuk. In the opera each of these three sections of the Exorcism is preceded by a brass fanfare that cites a solemn traditional melody for Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur.³³

Numerous other original traditional sources and references are interwoven in the elaborate scheme of Epstein’s *Dybbuk*, including a declared homage to Italian opera—and even to bel canto and the celebrated “Mad Scenes”—which for example appears in the Exorcism Scene:

As the Exorcism Ritual intensifies, there is frequent use of cantorial-style fioriture in the vocal line. This usage is a “translation” from the use of elaborate coloratura in Mad Scenes during the Bel Canto period of Italian Opera.³⁴

In this operatic context of powerful dramatic substance, without abstract stylization or ornamental exoticism, recognizable pre-existing melodies evoke distant communities by now vanished and bring them back to life with intensity and passion.

The recurrent use of quotation is then the voice of a shared culture, is a compositional procedure combined with an intense emotional response to An-Ski’s drama.

³² Solomon Epstein, *The Dybbuk*, Piano-Vocal Score, unpublished manuscript; © Copyright 1997 by Solomon Epstein. Act III, Scene 4; mm. 2017-2225; pp. 239-278.

³³ Solomon Epstein, *The Dybbuk: An Opera in Yiddish. Chart of Traditional Russian-Jewish Source Music Used in the Opera Melodically and Motivically*, unpublished manuscript, © 2012 by Solomon Epstein; pp. 7-9.

³⁴ Solomon Epstein, *The Dybbuk: An Opera in Yiddish. Chart of Traditional Russian-Jewish Source Music Used in the Opera Melodically and Motivically*, unpublished manuscript, © 2012 by Solomon Epstein; p. 9.

But the range of this vision extends even further: the consistent style—which the traditional Russian-Jewish melodies integrated into the texture of the opera contributes to the maintenance of—thanks to the authenticity of the musical sources introduced, results in generous accessibility without the necessity for simplification:

In composing *The Dybbuk*, I certainly intended to make the music immediately accessible for a general audience, but at the same time, I certainly intended NOT to oversimplify the musical style, but instead to try to meet S. An-Ski's challenge head on. So I was especially happy to see that general audiences found the music immediately engaging.³⁵

In the musical design of *The Dybbuk*, Epstein the opera composer and Epstein the learned scholar (who always as such stands aside and comes out into the open only when needed in the service of the work) thus integrate without fissures, while the intellectual effort of his creation does not weaken its theatrical impact.

On the expressive and dramaturgical level, the aim of the composer is "psychological realism". Solomon Epstein is deeply fascinated with S. An-Ski's statement that "*The Dybbuk* is a realistic drama about a mystical people."³⁶

This is also identifiably an operatic inheritance: Is not psychological realism a central intent of the great opera composers of the past such as Verdi and Puccini?

From yet another perspective, it is interesting to observe how for the achievement of such "psychological realism", the musical language of Epstein's *Dybbuk* comes to be modeled in relation to modern and contemporary music:

I'm not attracted to the strict 12-tone method as a system. Free atonality, however, is largely guided by instinct, maybe by the feel for the contour of a musical line.

I use it myself in Leah and Khonnon's final duet, to suggest Leah's loss of memory, and to convey the surreal situation of Leah's love duet with a ghost.

Atonality can of course be extremely powerful, but I think it is perhaps best used over short stretches, in bursts. But to restrict the orchestra to atonality over the course of an entire opera, even when there are clearly audible themes and motives, is to end up with a result that after a while sounds merely gray.

³⁵ Solomon Epstein, e-mail correspondence with the Author, September 23, 2012.

³⁶ The themes of realism and mysticism in An-Ski's play have been thoroughly studied by Gabriella Safran in the volume *Wandering Soul: The Dybbuk's Creator, S. An-sky*, particularly pp. 220-221. The realistic aim of radical An-Ski has been mainly explained in a mystical way by readers, commentators, and theater audience.

At a certain point, atonality can become mere dogmatism, and its practical result can add up to no more than a studious avoidance of 3rds and 6ths and triads. The result is, simply, lack of contrast.³⁷

It is also in this refutation of compositional dogma, that Solomon Epstein has made ample use of authentic traditional liturgical and Chassidic Russian-Jewish music. The harmonic language is inspired and determined by these traditional sources, which provide clear tonal centers without dictating the exclusion of modernity or experimentation.

Quotation, by not becoming an illustrative element, emerges finally at the heart of musical and theatrical creation.

By determining the choice of harmony, quotation gives new life to the folkloristic component and to the exoticism of *The Dybbuk*.

Here is why, in his central quest for communication, the composer thus proves totally disinterested in the exotic ornamental aspects.

Of the remote and the picturesque elsewhere, he holds dear the urgency of seizing a context of traditions condemned to extinction—through a creative alchemy that transforms the greatest distances of time and space into cultural proximity—and merging those traditions with another sphere remote and beloved, itself a carrier of memory and nostalgia, and equally an archetype for a composer of musical theater in the contemporary United States: the world of opera.

Within his complex design, Solomon Epstein has meant to maintain the old, direct affectionate relationship between the opera composer and his audience.

The Dybbuk by Solomon Epstein is thus a creation free from the style contaminations of postmodernism, which are detached and ironic, and free from the postmodern use of decontextualized music fragments from the past, even when such works are a direct adaptation of a literary source (which is a typical feature in contemporary musical theater, especially in the United States).

³⁷ Solomon Epstein, e-mail correspondence with the Author, October 23, 2012.

Also thanks to the undoubtedly original choice of a truly exotic language for a libretto, *The Dybbuk: An Opera in Yiddish* launches the challenge of travelling with naturalness and affection along the path of opera as a tradition of the past.

To such tradition Solomon Epstein's *Dybbuk* is openly connected, yet in a constant condition of independence and uniqueness within its own poetics.

