

# Children Possessed: Adam Maor and Yonatan Levy's Opera *The Sleeping Thousand* (2019)

MICHAL GROVER-FRIEDLANDER 

**Abstract** Adam Maor and Yonatan Levy's chamber opera *The Sleeping Thousand* refashions the Palestinian–Israeli conflict as a futuristic science-fiction political fantasy. Adopting a critical and satirical perspective, the opera develops *ad absurdum* an imaginative state of affairs out of which a utopian and dystopian situation unfolds. My argument is that in *The Sleeping Thousand*, children are central and, furthermore, that the image construed for them is new to the medium of opera. The image is disconcerting. The child is positioned in a troubled, brutal world and catalyses the portrayal of a violent, cursed, unethical, and estranged world inhabited by adults. Children are not assigned a voice but rather are reported on; in the report, they are said to be possessed by a dybbuk. In *The Sleeping Thousand*, a dybbuk phenomenon forms operatic children and, through them, infiltrates the opera as a whole.

## *The Sleeping Thousand*

*The Sleeping Thousand* by composer Adam Maor and playwright Yonatan Levy, both Israeli, premiered at the 2019 Aix-en-Provence festival.<sup>1</sup> The work is a chamber opera for four soloists, chamber orchestra, and electronics,<sup>2</sup> divided into nine scenes and

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Email: [groverm@tauex.tau.ac.il](mailto:groverm@tauex.tau.ac.il)

This article was written before the 7 October 2023 war. It is part of a larger project entitled 'Childhood in Opera', supported by a grant (no. 1568/20) from the Israel Science Foundation. I am grateful to Adam Maor and Yonatan Levy for generously sharing materials related to their work and for fascinating conversations about the collaborative process and their ideas about the opera. Jelena Novak kindly shared an interview with the artists conducted at the Centro de Estudos de Sociologia e Estética Musical (CESEM). I would like to thank Sapir Miedzinski for his valuable assistance with the musical examples and for insightful conversations about the opera. I am also indebted to the other members of the graduate student working group 'Childhood in Opera' – Noga Chelouche, Inbal Shilor Shemesh, and Oded Shnei-Dor – for stimulating exchanges of ideas.

<sup>1</sup> *The Sleeping Thousand*. Composition: Adam Maor. Libretto and direction: Yonatan Levy. Musical direction: Elena Schwartz. Scenery: Julien Brun. Costumes: Anouk Schiltz. Lighting: Omer Shizaf. Dramaturgy and assistant direction: Amir Farjoun. English translation: Evan Fallenberg. With Tomasz Kumiega, Gan-ya Ben-gur Akselrod, David Salsbery Fry, and Benjamin Alunni, Ensemble United Instruments of Lucillin, and Augustin Muller and Serge Lacourt of the Institut de Recherche et de Coordination Acoustique/Musique (IRCAM).

<sup>2</sup> The soloists: Nurit, Prime Minister's secretary (soprano); A Voice from the World (tenor) who sings three roles – Minister of Agriculture, Protester, Cantor; Prime Minister (baritone); Sh., Head of Israeli Secret Services (bass). The orchestra comprises clarinet in B $\flat$ , bass clarinet in B $\flat$ , arglul; accordion; large percussion section – bendir, tom-toms, cymbals, vibraslap, tam-tam, vibraphone, bass drum, tambourine, cowbells, crotales, singing bowl, opera gong, styrofoam, portable styrofoam, kutu wapa, Tibetan bowls (cymbal on floor tom), styropore; strings – violin, viola, violoncello,

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lasting around one hour.<sup>3</sup> It refashions the Palestinian–Israeli conflict as a futuristic science-fiction political fantasy. Adopting a critical and satirical perspective, the opera develops *ad absurdum* an imaginative state of affairs out of which a utopian and dystopian situation unfolds. Woven together are Israeli (secular) culture, political prejudice, social misconceptions, fear, anxiety, trauma, superstition, violence, arbitrariness, insomnia, night terrors, lucid dreaming, coma, and possession.

My argument is that in *The Sleeping Thousand* children are central and, furthermore, the image construed for them here is new to the medium of opera. The image is disconcerting, unsettling, and disturbing. Children are not assigned a voice but rather are reported on; in the report, they are said to be spoken through, a foreign expression forced upon them. Children in *The Sleeping Thousand* are positioned in a violent, brutal world and catalyse the portrayal of an unethical world inhabited by adults. The child is vital for the realization of the dystopian utopic trajectory of the opera. The figure of the child occupies an indirect circuitous presence. There is no role of a child, or an assigned voice. Children do not speak or sing. They are spoken through while asleep. The two populations, Palestinian and Israeli, are intertwined through sleep disorders – one has lucid dreams in a state of deep sleep, the other is sleepless. The figure of Israeli children in this matrix, I argue, gives voice to the Palestinian detainees held by Israeli authorities.<sup>4</sup> The children host a *dybbuk* – a troubled soul demanding justice – inside them. The *dybbuk* phenomenon that forms these children infiltrates

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double bass; keyboard computerized to produce various synthesized and non-synthesized sounds, prominent among them the oud.

<sup>3</sup> In this article I refer to the numbering of scenes in the score (unpublished) rather than in the libretto. In the score, the opera is divided into nine scenes, while in the libretto there are seven. The discrepancy begins in scene 4:

libretto score	
IV	IV
IV	V
V	VI
VI	VII
VI	VIII
VII	IX

<sup>4</sup> ‘Torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (“ill-treatment”) continue to be practiced widely worldwide, and the use of torture methods that leave no visible marks is on the increase in various contexts and countries’ (Elna Søndergaard, Rupert Skilbeck, and Efrat Shir, ‘Development of Interdisciplinary Protocols on Medico-Legal Documentation of Torture: Sleep Deprivation’, *Torture*, 29.2 (2019), pp. 23–27 (p. 24). I will not be able to analyse the opera’s relationship to real situations in the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. For studies and documentations on the use of torture methods of sleep deprivation in interrogations of Palestinian detainees in Israel, its inhumanity as well as its ineffectiveness, see, for example, Mahmud Sehwal, Pau Pérez-Sales, Khader Rasras, Wisam Sehwal, Alba Guasch, and Andrea Galan, ‘Sleep Deprivation Does Not Work: Epidemiology, Impacts and Outcomes of Incidental and Systematic Sleep Deprivation in a Sample of Palestinian Detainees’, *Torture*, 29.2 (2019), pp. 56–69; Søndergaard, Skilbeck and Shir, ‘Development of Interdisciplinary Protocols’; Ergün Cakal, ‘Befogging Reason, Undermining Will: Understanding Sleep Deprivation as Torture and Other Ill-Treatment in International Law’, *Torture*, 29.2 (2019), pp. 11–22; Jordana S. Rubel, ‘A Missed Opportunity: The Ramifications of the Committee against Torture’s Failure to Adequately Address Israel’s Ill-Treatment of Palestinian Detainees’, *Emory International Law Review*, 20.2 (2006), pp. 699–740; C. M. Grosso, ‘International Law in the Domestic Arena: The Case of Torture in Israel’, *Iowa Law Review*, 86.1

the opera as a whole. By the end, what separates the sleepers from the sleepless is reconceived.

To explain the exceptional particularity of this image of children, I provide an overview of how the medium of opera more generally constructs images of children. I then turn to the opera *The Sleeping Thousand* and focus on the image of children we find there.

## The Child in Opera

The child and childhood are, relatively speaking, quite a recent concern in opera.<sup>5</sup> The presence, role, and voice of children have been heightened and put on centre stage for little over a century. Humperdinck's *Hansel and Gretel*, from the late nineteenth century, is considered the first instance in opera in which childhood was given such a pervasive role. One can point to the occasional case of children in earlier operatic works, such as the three children in Mozart's *Magic Flute*. But even in this rare instance, children's voices do not express the world of the child but are instead meant to be representations of beneficent spirits.

In other rare cases prior to the twentieth century in which we encounter the child's voice, it is often heard within a mass or crowd, in the shape of a children's chorus (as in Bizet's *Carmen*). In a few cases, a solo child briefly emerges from within the chorus; for example, in Tchaikovsky's *Pique dame* there is a boy in a speaking role, and Puccini's *La Bohème* features a singing child emerging from the chorus. Children's roles are frequently present without any actual singing from the child, as when an adult sings the child's role (Mussorgsky, *Boris Godunov*). We find silent children in, for example, Bellini's *Norma*, in the form of children about to be murdered. There is even the interesting case of Gluck's *Alceste*, which exists in one version with children singing (the Italian version from 1767 calls for two children in singing roles) and another with silent children (the French version from 1776 casts the children in non-singing roles).<sup>6</sup>

This situation changed in the twentieth century. An initial list of twentieth- and twenty-first-century composers who approach the world of the child in opera would include Birtwistle, Britten, Chin, Copland, Czernowin, Debussy, de Falla, Dove, Henze, Janáček, Knussen, Maxwell Davies, Menotti, Pfitzner, Portman, Ravel, Rorem, Stravinsky, and Weill. A drastic shift occurs when a child occupies centre stage as a soloist, when a child determines the narrative, and when children become the intended audience. Such characteristics, as stated, are relatively recent. There are in fact composers, Britten, Maxwell Davies, and Menotti chief among them, for whom

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(2000), pp. 305–38; and James Ron, 'Varying Methods of State Violence', *International Organization*, 51.2 (1997), pp. 275–300.

<sup>5</sup> Studies on the topic have also been scarce. For a recent overview, see Andrew Sutherland, *Children in Opera* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020). On themes of childhood in opera and what the child comes to mean in opera, see *Childhood and the Operatic Imaginary since 1900*, ed. by Joy H. Calico and Justin Vickers (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>6</sup> The version with mute children is most often performed today.

images of childhood filter through their entire output, evident in subject matter, roles, treatment of voice, and musical technique. Britten employs both the raw, untrained child's voice and the child trained in virtuosic operatic singing in order to unfold a troubled, brutal world. Britten's manipulation of the materiality of a child's voice, his alteration of timbre, his enactment of breaks and stutters, and his laying bare of a voice's vulnerability reveal several registers of representation vis-à-vis the child and childhood in opera. More often than not, these manifestations point to the problematization of the child's image and of the child's voice in opera, something to which I will return in relation to *The Sleeping Thousand*.

When children begin to appear in opera in the twentieth century, some are just as silent as their earlier silent counterparts, as we see in Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, Britten's *Peter Grimes*, Menotti's *The Medium*, and the lullaby scenes in Berg's *Wozzeck*, Menotti's *The Consul*, and Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, where children are sung to. These sorts of silent children are not attempts at a realistic portrayal of a person's first months and years, as these children are rarely supposed to be at the age when one cannot yet speak. The twentieth-century incorporation of the child's 'unfit', 'other' voice seems to me to be one of the ways that opera and music theatre have expanded the vocal palette of twentieth- and twenty-first-century opera.<sup>7</sup> A child's voice undermines the hegemony of the sound of traditional operatic voices, as well as of their timbre, technique, categorization, and more. Boys' and girls' voices have different timbral characteristics.<sup>8</sup> And yet, the voice is not distinctive: a child can be cast with either a boy's or a girl's voice, with a broken or unbroken voice of either sex, or with an adult female alto or soprano or adult male tenor.

Often the child figures as a disturbing presence, an embodiment of the operatic adult world's cursed character – for example, when the child is surrounded by an environment of ethical ambiguity, compromise, and violence, as in Debussy's *Pelléas and Mélisande*, Berg's *Wozzeck*, Britten's *The Turn of the Screw*, and Rorem's *Three Sisters Who Are Not Sisters*. One can suggest how in these cases the theme of childhood innocence is challenged. The concession to and sacrifice of the world of childhood via the adult world's disorder is also a central theme of Brecht and Weill's *Der Jasager*, an opera bringing together a schoolteacher and children on a mountain trip with a child's ritual sacrifice in the name of ancient customs.<sup>9</sup> Studies of Ravel's *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* – an opera that has been central to the mapping of psychoanalytic structures onto musical ones, delineating moral development in the achievement

<sup>7</sup> For the child's voice understood in relation to opera's original attraction to the high treble voice and its association with the figure of the angel, see Michel Poizat, *The Angel's Cry: Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera* (Cornell University Press, 1992).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, studies by Ann-Christine Meckea and Johan Sundberg, 'Gender Differences in Children's Singing Voices: Acoustic Analyses and Results of a Listening Test', *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, 127.5 (2010), pp. 3223–31; and Desmond C. Sergeant, Peta J. Sjölander, and Graham F. Welch, 'Listeners' Identification of Gender Differences in Children's Singing', *Research Studies in Music Education*, 24.1 (2005), pp. 28–39.

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed interpretation of the opera, see Michal Grover-Friedlander, 'Transformations of a Killing of a Boy: Weill and Brecht's *Der Jasager*', in *Music's Obedient Daughter*, ed. by Sabine Lichtenstein (Rodopi, 2014), pp. 381–404.

of empathy – have emphasized the problematizing of the conception of childhood innocence.<sup>10</sup> Significantly, Melanie Klein, with her vision of the violence of desire in the mind of the child, has analysed Ravel's opera. Ravel's work shares with many later operas the ability to capture, by way of the child and the figure of its voice, a world of extreme terror.

### **The Child in *The Sleeping Thousand***

The opera *The Sleeping Thousand* is neither addressed to children nor graced with any children's roles. Children come up while a newspaper item is being read. Like other images of children from the early twentieth century onwards (as in Weill and Britten, for example), the child in *The Sleeping Thousand* is positioned in a troubled, brutal world and catalyses the portrayal of a violent, cursed, unethical, and estranged world inhabited by adults.

In *The Sleeping Thousand*, children are brought into the opera via a chain of voicing: an opera singer sings as though a synagogue had lent him to the opera. Adopting a particular style, he reads aloud a text that someone else has written, animating the written word by acting out the text's roles, voicing parents who have reported on their children. In the parents' account, he voices them imitating their children's altered voices. The children do not themselves speak but are spoken through another.

Always dormant in a child's voice is the eventual voice the child will one day possess. Children are those who have another – latent – voice within. A child's voice is on the way *to*, in a stage *of*. That 'other voice' intrudes in *The Sleeping Thousand*. It is not, however, the voice the child will have; instead the voice signals the inhabitant of yet another voice – a dybbuk – within the child. A dybbuk is the troubled soul of a dead sinner or of a pious man who has been sinned against and who demands justice. To be heard, the dybbuk enters another's body, not replacing the host but speaking through it. Children, in *The Sleeping Thousand*, are thus not employed for their timbre or special traits. Rather, it seems to me, they enable a horrific effect to be achieved, because they are not true characters with voices and, moreover, their lack of a voice is a trait they share with the Palestinian detainees. More on this later.

As Adam Maor writes on his website:

My current preoccupation as a composer is to define a personal language that conveys my point of view on the cultural and political context in which I grew up in contemporary Israel-Palestine. I do so through the prism of contemporary Western tradition<sup>11</sup> [...] to

<sup>10</sup> See Peter M. Kaminsky, 'The Child on the Couch; Or, Toward a (Psycho) Analysis of Ravel's *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*', in *Unmasking Ravel: New Perspectives on the Music*, ed. by Peter M. Kaminsky (University of Rochester Press, 2011), pp. 306–30. Among the few important essays devoted to the place of the child in particular operas, I would like to especially single out the inspiring work by Carolyn Abbate on Ravel's *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*, in which she analyses the child's disturbing vocal closing utterance that brings the opera to an end; Carolyn Abbate, 'Outside the Tomb', in *In Search of Opera* (Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 185–246.

<sup>11</sup> Maor studied in Geneva with Michael Jarrell, Luis Naon, and Eric Daubresse and at IRCAM in Paris.

which I have progressively integrated elements from the Arabic music tradition that represents a part of my family's cultural heritage and a continuous area of musical research. Electronics feature frequently in my work, oftentimes generating the core musical ideas on which my compositions are built, while also providing a way to integrate extra-musical ideas and references. Because politics has always been an important part of my life, a number of my pieces have been inspired by current events and the recent history of the Middle East. For example, *Occupy Haifa* seeks to reconstruct the soundscape of what my hometown could have been; *Beyrouth15072006* is a homage to Mazen Kerbaj and a painful study about war – one waged by my country's government.<sup>12</sup>

## The Text

For seven years now, the opera tells us, some one thousand Palestinian detainees have been put into a state of deep sleep, into a coma, by the Israeli authorities. Killing them would have brought about international measures against Israel, so instead they have been put into a state of continual sleep. But since that time, the Jewish population has been unable to fall asleep. They suffer from sleep disorders and recurring collective nightmares. Children endure epileptic seizures in the middle of the night, mucus and blood dripping from their mouths. They gurgle, mumble gibberish, and bite their tongues, as is known to occur, we are told, in situations when one is coerced to speak Arabic. The children now speaking Arabic show signs of possession by a dybbuk. The Israeli authorities believe that the Palestinian detainees are communicating with each other in their sleep, infiltrating the Jews' dreams and overtaking their consciousness. The Palestinian detainees, the authorities believe, are lucid dreamers, which is to say they maintain partial awareness while asleep and thus control their own dreams. They are believed to have devised a way to dominate the Jewish population. Dybbuk-like, they speak through Jewish children, committing 'dream attacks on the Jewish psyche'.<sup>13</sup> The opera ends with the Prime Minister issuing the order to send someone disguised as a Palestinian detainee on a suicide mission. The volunteer, penetrating the detainees' dreamscape, is to detonate an explosion, killing himself or herself along with the detainees. Nurit, the Prime Minister's assistant, volunteers for the mission. Crossing over into their dream-realm, she discovers that the sleeping thousand prisoners are indeed lucid dreamers, but they are not responsible for the collective nightmares of the Jewish population. Rather, the detainees have created for themselves a new, autonomous existence, a spiritually immaterial realm free of history and politics. Nurit joins them and remains on the other side.

While he was preparing the libretto, Yonatan Levy was also writing a 'dramatic novel' entitled *URU AAEEM: The Sleeping Thousand*.<sup>14</sup> The dramatic novel, like the libretto

<sup>12</sup> Adam Maor, 'About', n.d. <<https://adammaor.com/about/>> [accessed 15 January 2022].

<sup>13</sup> Adam Maor, 'The Sleeping Thousand', 2019 <<https://adammaor.com/portfolio/the-sleeping-thousand/>> [accessed 15 January 2022].

<sup>14</sup> Yonatan Levy, *URU AAEEM: The Sleeping Thousand* (Dehak Publishing House, 2019) (in Hebrew). English translation by Evan Fallenberg. *URU AAEEM* means, in Hebrew, 'Wake up, brothers'. The title is transliterated in an unconventional way – *AAEEM* rather than 'AHIM' – and play with vowels and their sounds is central to the novel (and libretto) on the whole.



though substantially longer and more intricate, is a kind of satirical play, incorporating many more characters, locations, scenes, embedded narratives, references, political opinions, debates, and quotes, as well as an array of genres and writing styles. Storytelling frames the central story about the sleeping thousand, and it resurfaces between the scenes, gradually becoming intertwined with occurrences in the main story.<sup>15</sup> The storytelling, a grotesque fairy tale, is told by an owner of a hummus restaurant and his wife: their hummus is prepared according to a special recipe that can tap into the consciousness of each restaurant patron and uniquely alter it.<sup>16</sup> At a certain point their special hummus is tied into the story about the detainees. The novel describes Israel as being in a state of gradual collapse:<sup>17</sup> it is besieged by international pressure, natural disasters, health threats, and terror attacks conducted by comatose detainees. Numerous texts, narratives, and episodes are braided within the central narrative, among them a computer war game and an adventure story from the children's book series *Hasamba*.<sup>18</sup> Academic conferences are inserted that are dedicated to, for instance, how to deal with left-wing political cells undermining the government, and to sleep disorders in children with 'identification-with-the-state syndrome' – including an extensive tree diagram that classifies the syndrome by type, symptom, and treatment.

In the novel, in contrast to the opera, one child is specified: the son of Nurit and her ex-husband, Kapach. The child and the ex-husband are not in the libretto (parts of the ex-husband's role are distributed among roles in the opera). In the novel, the child appears in a few scenes, nearly always with the father, having nightmares, and always in the context of the father's unsuccessful attempts to put the child to sleep. The child mutters gibberish and jumbled syllables. In the novel, it is Kapach who crosses the waking/sleeping divide and, leaving his child behind, joins the sleeping detainees. Then the child, for the first time, utters a complete word, 'father'. He also delivers the

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<sup>15</sup> The novel (as well as the libretto) is clearly referring to *One Thousand and One Nights*, not only through the act of storytelling but also in the embedding of stories within stories, and in the thousand detainees that become a thousand and one at the end of the opera. There are even a thousand stories in the Jewish population's dreams.

<sup>16</sup> The Israeli authorities are secretly adding detainees' semen to the food dispensed to the Jewish population, as it is known to transform consciousness. Their semen is also used to prepare fertility medication and to treat sensations of numbness in the genitals. These and other sexual components of the novel (including the feeling of being circumcised and the disappearance of the body), as well as animal themes (a speaking dog appears regularly in the Jewish sector's night terrors), are not included in the opera.

<sup>17</sup> In the novel, the sleepless Israelis endure nightmares about practically any harm that has ever been visited upon Jews over the course of history: wars, pogroms, the Holocaust, terror attacks, and so on, and they also suffer from imaginary nightmares. The entire Jewish population has a recurring nightmare in which the Palestinian population eats them up.

<sup>18</sup> *Hasamba* in Hebrew is an acronym for 'The Absolutely Absolute Secret Group'. This is the title of a series of children's adventure books written by Yigal Mossinson from 1950 to 1994. The stories concern the heroic adventures of a group of children while assisting the underground movement in its struggle for Israeli statehood; once the state is formed, they continue their work by assisting the security forces in the fight against their enemies. The children repeatedly save the day. Books in the *Hasamba* series were very popular among children and formed an important part of Israeli culture. In the novel, the *Hasamba* adventure forms a story within a story and acts out one of the main variants on the novel's main narrative. *Hasamba* is read aloud by Kapach, Nurit's ex-husband, to their child, who constantly has trouble sleeping.

novel's final line. The child screaming in his mother's arms quotes a ceremonial utterance said in the synagogue when completing the reading of one of the books of the Pentateuch: 'we will be strong'. These words are said for the purpose of encouraging the rereading and the further study of the Bible. In the world of the novel, rereading, or any redoing for that matter, only fosters the catastrophe. What is needed is an altered state of consciousness. Once on the other side, Kapach interprets what the detainees are saying (they are actually singing) in a manner reserved for the interpretation of holy scripture. The detainees have created for themselves a spiritual alternative, a utopian existence situated beyond geographical and national borders.<sup>19</sup>

*URU AAEEM: The Sleeping Thousand* is not unique in its acute social and political awareness. Yonatan Levy views his works as 'an integral part of a broader civic engagement'. He says that his interests have been 'inspired by ancient religions and biblical texts, [and that] his style blends satirical and spiritual elements and explores the theater's metaphysical potential. It uses a complex poetic language, sometimes hermetic, together with banal everyday dialogues. Their enactments are both prosaic and ceremonial.'<sup>20</sup> Among Levy's other socially and politically oriented works are *Saddam Hussein* (2011) and *Good Energies* (2011), a staging of an economics committee protocol from the Israeli parliament.<sup>21</sup>

## Voicing Children

The Prime Minister cannot sleep, so he decides to check what is being said about him in the press. A newspaper article is read out loud by the 'Chazan', a Jewish cantor. It tells of possessed-like children (scene 4):

*Plague of the Firstborn Children* screamed the headline of *The Valley Snooze* in bold red Utopia font. Subheading: *Toddlers stricken, too*. Photo caption: Breaking news – Jewish babies overcome with nighttime epileptic fits and heard babbling in Arabic [...] By Raphael Numa. Panic ensues [...] in the wake of a growing number of spontaneous epileptic seizures and feverish convulsions among Jewish children.

<sup>19</sup> 'Child' in Israeli society is a designation loaded with paradoxes. To bear children, to procreate, is the highest Jewish calling. This imperative goes hand in hand with delivering the child over to serve in the army at the age of 18. It is as if a child were a temporary deposit, and there was a willingness to offer it as a sacrifice. The 'child' embodies Israeli society's irrationalities, traumas, and paranoias. For nineteenth-century formulations of images of the child and childhood in Hebrew and Yiddish literature (Bialik and Abramovitch), see Rotem Preger Wagner, "'The Live Son and the Dead One': Constructing Children and Childhood in Hebrew Literature in its Formative Period', *Dappim: Research in Literature*, 20 (2017), pp. 169–87 (in Hebrew). For the image of the Israeli child, the *tsabar*, in the 1920s as a living shield, as the nation's hope and its victim, see Salina Mashiach, 'Yonatan Ha-Katan ("Young Yonatan"): Main Characteristics of the "Young Tsabar", or Culture as a Lizard's Tail', *Moznaim*, 4 (January 1996), pp. 15–18. For analysis of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Israeli society's collective fear and its collective sense of victimhood and aggression, see Daniel Bar-Tal, 'Why Does Fear Override Hope in Societies Engulfed by Intractable Conflict, as It Does in the Israeli Society?', *Political Psychology*, 22.3 (2001), pp. 601–27, and Noa Schori-Eyal, Eran Halperin, and Daniel Bar-Tal, 'Three Layers of Collective Victimhood: Effects of Multileveled Victimhood on Intergroup Conflicts in the Israeli–Arab Context', *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 44.12 (2014), pp. 778–94.

<sup>20</sup> Gulbenkian, 'Yonatan Levy', 14 January 2020 <<https://gulbenkian.pt/musica/biography/yonatan-levy/>> [accessed 15 January 2022].

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.



Pictured: A father cradling his unconscious son, whose head hangs backward as saliva dribbles from his mouth. 'Suddenly we realized he wasn't reacting,' explains David Nir, 42, of Nir David. 'All he could do was grunt and make guttural sounds [...] then his right arm started flailing about [...] when blood started coming out of his mouth I was sure we'd lost him.' The bleeding, it turned out thanks to an experienced ambulance crew, had nothing to do with the child's internal organs: it was the result of the excessive tongue-biting prevalent in cases of involuntary speaking of Arabic. 'His eyes were empty, I was in shock,' says Itta from the town of Rehov, whose son Tulip started convulsing and was admitted to Poriah Hospital. 'He was muttering, and spit foamed on his lips, and he seemed to be constantly repeating Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar [...] It was like a dybbuk had taken possession of him [...] People are going to sleep in fear, not knowing what'll come out of their children's mouths in the middle of the night. It's terrifying.'<sup>22</sup>

O, the keening of babes [...]<sup>23</sup>

Referring merely to a small portion of the text from scene 4 as an example, we can point out the wealth of cultural references satirized in the libretto. '*Plague of the Firstborn Children*' is a reference to the biblical story about the final and worst of the gruesome plagues God visited upon the Egyptians as punishment for not freeing the Hebrew slaves. Following the deaths of the firstborn Egyptian children, the Hebrew slaves are liberated, beginning their forty-year exodus to the promised land of Israel. In addition, scene 4's title, 'Numa Emek' ('The Valley Snooze'), is the name of the newspaper being read. In Hebrew, this is a play on a culturally iconic song from before the state of Israel was founded. 'Numa Emek' are the first words of the song from 1934 entitled 'Shir Ha-Emek' ('The Valley Song'), with music by Daniel Sambursky and words by Natan Alterman. The song was commissioned for a Zionist film, aimed at raising money from Jews abroad, called *The Promised Land*, which showed the pioneers working the land. The song mentions the first settlements built in the 1920s. It is night, and everyone is sleeping after the day's hardships working the land. The land, 'our land', is glorified and adored. The refrain quotes from the book of Isaiah, alluding to imminent danger, and one of the verses tells of someone who has been shot dead. 'Numa' in Hebrew is an imperative: fall asleep, glorious land, we are guarding you; 'Numa' is the journalist's last name.

The scene is recited by the Chazan. In Judaism, a chazan is the emissary of the congregation who leads the service, a figure easily recognizable via the style of chanting and the communication of text. In *The Sleeping Thousand*, it is as if the tenor is imitating an Ashkenazi cantor. As such, the role is unlike the other three solo roles in the opera. The roles of Prime Minister, Head of Secret Services, and Nurit (the Prime Minister's secretary) stand not for a style of singing but for a position, a job, an occupation. Moreover, the tenor is multivocal,<sup>24</sup> having two other incarnations in addition to the Chazan: Minister of Agriculture and Protester. The three roles sung by the tenor are referred to as 'A Voice from the World'. It could be that these are voices from the world that enter the opera, or that the world enters differently through each

<sup>22</sup> In the score, scene 4 ends here; scene 5 begins with 'O, the keening of babes'.

<sup>23</sup> Translated from the Hebrew by Evan Fallenberg.

<sup>24</sup> See Katherine Meizel, *Multivocality: Singing on the Borders of Identity* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

role acquired by the voice. In either case, it would seem that the voice is not only plural but also movable, migratory.

The Chazan appears only in scene 4. He reads aloud a mundane newspaper item, which is also read silently by the Prime Minister behind him. The Chazan voices the parents and the children he is reading about. This is what we get: an opera singer imitates a Jewish cantor, who in turn imitates a Jewish parent imitating her child, who is possessed by a Palestinian.

*The child’s eyes were empty*

‘His [the child’s] eyes were empty, I was in shock’, says one of the parents in the newspaper article. The moments the Chazan is voicing others differ from the rest of his delivery – as though a voice from a different realm has taken over. Voicing the parent lies in stark contrast to the predominantly syllabic style of the Cantor’s singing. Rather than delivering a lot of text quite swiftly and syllabically, the first half of the phrase, ‘His eyes were empty’, repeats and jumps down an octave, and a long melisma on the final syllable is introduced. The second half of the phrase, ‘I was in shock’, employs extended vocal techniques. The timbre is striking, modified by vocal effects such as falsetto, jaw vibrato, and diaphragm accentuation (Example 1). I am imagining a puppeteer modifying his voice with a swazzle – a tiny reed-like device that puppeteers place in their mouths. The instrumental accompaniment also changes. Throughout the opera, the prominent figure typifying the instrumental behaviour is a gesture of gradual rhythmic acceleration or gradual rhythmic deceleration. Here both figures appear together in a wave-like gesture. In addition, instead of the instruments all being grouped together, as in earlier scenes, here the gesture appears in individual instruments and in the vocal part. It is as though the orchestra were speaking through the voice.

*Jewish–Palestinian chimera*

A few bars on, the Cantor voices the possessed children as depicted in the accounts delivered by the parents and reported in the news item. ‘Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar’ is one possessed child’s cry. As with voicing the parents, voicing the child is conspicuous. Muezzin-like, ‘Allahu Akbar’ is repeated twelve times. No longer recitation on one

Example 1 The child’s eyes ‘were empty’. Maor and Levy, *The Sleeping Thousand*, bars 681–88. Reproduced by permission.

The image shows a musical score for a vocal part. It consists of two staves of music. The first staff is labeled 'Chazan' and starts at bar 681. The lyrics under this staff are 'ha' ey na-yim she-lo ha-yu rei ko - - - - - t ha' ey-'. The music features a melisma on the final syllable 'ey-'. The second staff starts at bar 684 and continues the lyrics 'na-yim she-lo ha-yu rei ko - - - - - t ha-yi - ti be sho - - - k'. The music includes various vocal techniques indicated by symbols: a diamond for falsetto, 'J.V.' for jaw vibrato, and a star for diaphragm accentuation. Dynamics markings include *p*, *mf*, and *p sub.*. There are also numerical markings (3, 7, 6) above the notes, possibly indicating fingerings or breath marks.

note, the melodic contour widens; it is scalar and lyrical. The passage is in the Phrygian dominant mode (on E), a scale used in both klezmer music (*ahava raba* or *frigish*) and Arabic music (*maqam Hijaz* or *Hijaz Nahawand*). The double reference intertwines Middle Eastern Arab and Eastern-European Jewish sounds. Knotted together, inseparable, these elements make the child a Jewish–Palestinian chimera (Example 2).

Example 2 Involuntary speaking of Arabic. Maor and Levy, *The Sleeping Thousand*, bars 694–700. Reproduced by permission.

The musical score for Example 2, bars 694–700, is presented in a multi-staff format. The score is divided into two systems, with a double bar line and repeat sign at the beginning of the second system (bar 697). The first system (bars 694–700) includes staves for Bass Clarinet in Bb, Accordion, Vibraphone, Chazan, Violin I, Viola, Violoncello, and Contrabass. The second system (bars 697–700) includes staves for B. Cl., Accord., Vib., Chazan, Vln. I, Vla., Vc., and Cb. The score features various musical notations, including dynamics (pp, mp, mf, p), articulation (accents, slurs), and performance instructions (flautando, arco, l.v., vibrato). The Chazan part includes lyrics in Arabic script: 'al - la wak - bar al - la wak - bar al - la wak - bar' and 'al - la wak - bar al - la wak - bar al - la wak - bar'. The tempo is marked 'A tempo (♩ = 60)' and 'Meno mosso'. The key signature is one sharp (F#).

### Children possessed by a dybbuk

Towards the end of scene 4, we hear an odd change in the Chazan’s voice. The change embodies another striking moment: fear that the children are possessed by a dybbuk. As I show later, the children do not have the signs of possession by a dybbuk; rather, the dybbuk serves as a marker of something else. The Jewish sector and the Israeli authorities are convinced that the detainees are lucid dreamers who can dwell within other people’s dreams, and are sure that they are planning to bring down the entire Jewish population. The change in the voice occurs with the word ‘dybbuk’: we hear falsetto, the ascent of almost two octaves in glissandos, transitions between two vowels (U-A, dybbU-Ak), and diaphragm accentuation (Example 3).

### Children’s chorus

In the midst of the Chazan’s ‘dybbuk’, the other three soloists (soprano, baritone, bass) enter one at a time, forming a small chorus. The chorus utters fragments of the words ‘yellalot olal’ (‘keening of babes’) over and over again. The chorus voices the wailing, moaning, and sobbing of possessed children. In scene 4 alone, four words are used to denote different ages of children: toddler (*pa’ot*), infant (*olal*), baby (*tinok*), and child (*yeled*). It is typical for Yonatan Levy to work with sounds of words, invent conjugations, play with onomatopoeia, and morph words into other words close in sound. With ‘yellalot olal’ he chooses similar-sounding words for ‘keening’ (*yellalot*) and for

Example 3 ‘It was like a dybbuk had taken possession of him’. Maor and Levy, *The Sleeping Thousand*, bars 700–06. Reproduced by permission.

The musical score is divided into two systems. The first system covers bars 700-701, and the second system covers bars 702-706. The vocal parts are: Soprano Solo, Chazan, Baritone Solo, and Bass Solo. The lyrics for the Chazan part are: 'ze ha - ya ke - 'i - lu hish - ta - let 'u - lav di - buk di - bu (a) di -'. The lyrics for the Baritone Solo part are: 'yel - L - - - - - la - L - - - - - lot'. The lyrics for the Bass Solo part are: 'yel - L - - - - - la - L - - - - - lot'. The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics (mf, p, pp, f), articulation (trills, glissandos), and diaphragm accentuation. A legend at the bottom explains the symbols used in the score: a diamond for diaphragm accentuation, a square for consonants (articulatory phonetics), a wavy line for spontaneous transitions between two vowels (U-A), and a diamond with a dot for falsetto.

'babes' (*olal*). Maor fragments the words into smaller units of sound, playing with closed (on a consonant) and open (on a vowel) endings surrounding the 'l' sound: yel, l, la, l, lot, o, l, la, l. These create the scene's rhythmic modes. The technique is inspired by *tajwid's* rules for reciting the Quran (how many beats per vowel, articulation, pronunciation, accentuation, intonation, and more). The small units of sound are sung in a loop by the chorus, as they embody children's cries (Example 3).

Centre stage, on his desk, the Prime Minister is curled up, foetus-like, rocking his body back and forth. The chorus has expanded through the addition of the Cantor's voice. The Cantor, before joining the wailing chorus, falls silent; when he rejoins, he changes his vocal material to match the chorus's, accommodating his singing to its style. Like the chorus members, the Chazan transforms himself into sheer voice, part of a chorus. All characters have shed their individuality. The rhythms in all parts of the chorus are similar though slightly out of sync, almost but not quite imitating one another; they all share a soft dynamic; all parts have a small range and are repetitive; individual pitches are hard to distinguish. The soloists have become a mass. They, in Steven Connor's words, project a 'strange and powerful plural-singular'. The individual voice merges with the choral voice, is assimilated into the voices of the others.<sup>25</sup> The sound produced by a chorus is more apparent than those producing it, as is the case in nature with, for example, a chorus of cicadas.<sup>26</sup>

When children's choruses feature in twentieth-century opera, they are not always represented in a straightforward or direct manner, as had been the case in earlier decades. In Poulenc's surrealist opera *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, a man gives birth to 40,049 babies in a single day. The newborns instantaneously grow up, and their voices are adult. Another well-known opera associated with an unusual children's chorus is Richard Strauss's *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (1919), with its chorus of six unborn children (sung by children). The fairy-tale-like opera tells of two childless couples: in one of the couples the half-human woman cannot bear children since she has no shadow, whereas the woman in the other couple does not want to bear children. The chorus of unborn children first emerges lamenting, wailing, and frightened, calling their yet-to-be mother and father for help. The voices, emerging from spell-cast fish cooking in a fire pan, are devastating to the woman, who feels they are haunting her. The chorus of unborn children returns in the fairy tale's happy end. The couples, united in love and the desire for procreation, sing together with the unusual disembodied chorus of their unborn children. In Lodovico Rocca and Renato Simoni's opera *Il dibbuk* (1934),<sup>27</sup> based on An-Ski's play, there are also unborn babies.<sup>28</sup> Two friends take an oath that their future offspring will marry. Over time the friends part ways, their promise is

<sup>25</sup> Steven Connor, 'Choralities', *Twentieth-Century Music*, 13.1 (2016), pp. 3–23 (p. 3).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> For a detailed interpretation of the opera, see Michal Grover-Friedlander, *Operatic Afterlives* (Zone, 2011), pp. 115–47.

<sup>28</sup> Rocca had been struck by the performance of An-Ski's *Dybbuk* by the Habima Hebrew theatre troupe at Teatro di Torino in October 1929. S. An-Ski (Shloymeh-Zanyil Rapaport), *The Dybbuk: A Play in Four Acts* (Boni & Liveright, 1926). An-Ski's *Dybbuk* was also translated into Italian in 1927. See Samuele Avisar, *Teatro Ebraico* (Nuova Accademica Editrice, 1957), p. 71.

forgotten, and they break the oath. The children, now man and woman and unaware of the oath, fall in love. The man finds it unbearable that the woman has been promised in marriage to another. As a result, he dies and his troubled soul is transformed into a dybbuk, who possesses the woman; because she yearns for him, she meets her death as well when the dybbuk is exorcised. Having prematurely departed the world, they have no heirs. In the opera's final duet, the dead lovers sing an elegiac lullaby lamenting their unconsummated marriage and unborn offspring.

In the children's chorus of *The Sleeping Thousand*, solo roles lose their meaning and are stripped of any distinguishing features – musical, textual, dramatic, or narrative. In place of roles are sounds – voices. Vocality is now an entity: voices draw attention to themselves as sonority, as sound independent of character, utterance, and expression. Soloists' roles are annulled for the sake of the voice of children, each voice a version of all the others. All are possessed. All afflicted by a dybbuk.

### Crossing Over

At the end of *The Sleeping Thousand*, in scene 9, Nurit crosses the line separating the sleepless from the sleepers. Shedding her identity and her role, she joins the sleeping Palestinians. In an interview, Adam Maor mentions the opera's ending in connection with the Orpheus myth and 'crossing over'.<sup>29</sup> Nurit, perhaps like Euridice, is ultimately to remain on the other side. Yonatan Levy says that Nurit 'cross[es] the lines, meet [s] the other [...] understand[s] the other'.<sup>30</sup>

In this act of joining, Nurit has become one of the children construed by the opera. In scene 4 she lends her voice to a wailing chorus. In scene 9, she is in character as the Prime Minister's secretary, and it is her choice whether to become one of the sleepers. Mid-opera, children, dybbuk-like, assume Palestinian characteristics; by the end of the opera, the dybbuk, the incorporation of the other, is willingly assumed.

In scene 9, when crossing over, Nurit is accompanied by three non-Western solo instruments: oud, arghul, and bendir.<sup>31</sup> The scene is modal (as is the chorus in scene 4 detailed earlier) and is the only scene featuring an oud. Nurit recites in an improvisatory fashion over a stationary bass note or chord. Her manner resembles that of a muezzin reading from the Quran,<sup>32</sup> accents falling on consonants and closed syllables (e.g. v, m, r).

<sup>29</sup> 'The Sleeping Thousand: A Conversation in English with Yonatan Levy and Adam Maor, Creators of the Opera *Sleeping Thousand* (2019)'. Portuguese premiere at the Gulbenkian Foundation in January 2020, moderated by Nicholas McNair, at CESEM, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_zA1ToHFyFg&t=1s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_zA1ToHFyFg&t=1s)> [accessed 14 August 2021].

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> The arghul is an ancient Egyptian reed instrument from the time of the Pharaohs still played today in Egypt, Palestine, and Sardinia. It has two tubes, one of which serves as a drone with a changeable pitch; its mouthpiece is similar to that of a clarinet. The bendir, also an ancient Egyptian instrument, is a drum still played today in North Africa and in Sufi ceremonies. It is played with the hand and is held vertically. In scene 9, the non-western instruments are played using extended techniques, for example employing brush, bow, and superball on the bendir.

<sup>32</sup> Maor's description, Zoom interview with author, 2 October 2021.



The feature is not unique to this scene but is more pronounced here. A motif on the oud introduces the scene, punctuates it, and is in dialogue with the voice. The oud motif (G–A half flat–B flat–G) is an arabesque figure around G.<sup>33</sup> It sounds in *Jins Bayati* maqam (on G). After the oud freely repeats the motif three times, the voice enters and embellishes the oud motif above an F drone, in *Jins Rast* maqam (on F). F, rather than the oud's G, is the centre of gravity. The scene shifts its centre between the two maqams, preserving the duality G, F without creating tension between them. A sense of duality is retained when the oud and the voice converge on F<sup>34</sup> and when they converge on G.<sup>35</sup> Again, towards the end of the opera, with the Head of Secret Services' words 'I have spoken only nonsense my whole life',<sup>36</sup> we are once again in the realm of F. It does not sound as though a struggle over a centre, a sound, or a style of music had transpired. Maor emphasizes the profound influence Middle Eastern and Arabic music have exerted on his music, linking Spanish Jewish music with Middle Eastern music.<sup>37</sup> He locates his heritage and identity in both cultures.<sup>38</sup> Sonic associations between musical cultures, identified within scene 9, are also heard between the Chazan's Eastern European Jewish chant (scene 4) and Nurit's Middle Eastern Muezzin chant (scene 9).

Indeed, the two scenes, 4 and 9, are the opera's climactic scenes. They are also the most lyrical. The voice part in scene 4 is closer to recitation, while the voice in scene 9 approximates an aria that sounds improvised. Nurit's part in scene 9 goes further and is more developed, I would even say more musical, than the Chazan's part in scene 4. The two climactic scenes are related dramatically and musically – one with Jewish-sounding music, the other with Arabic-sounding music. Both scenes feature short melodic dialogues between voice and solo instrument, bass clarinet and violin in scene 4 and oud in scene 9. A sonic tie is formed through the two scenes' modality: scene 4 is tonal-modal, scene 9 is modal. They are the only scenes with the tendency for a centre. In addition, the scenes are associated with each other via the opera's central gesture. In both, the acceleration–deceleration gesture is salient and features on numerous levels. It occurs as a wave of acceleration followed or preceded by deceleration; it occurs on more than one note – on a two- or three-note trill figure; it lasts for longer stretches of time; it appears in the voice part as well. The composer refers to this gesture in terms of 'energy', explaining that it is quite free, unbound by time, propelled by an impetus to arrive on the following beat.<sup>39</sup>

## Dybbuk

To be possessed by a dybbuk is to be taken over by the soul of the dead in a type of co-inhabitation. A dybbuk forces itself into another's body, not replacing the host but

<sup>33</sup> See bar 1159.

<sup>34</sup> See bars 1175–77.

<sup>35</sup> See bar 1202.

<sup>36</sup> See bars 1298–99.

<sup>37</sup> Interview, 2 October 2021.

<sup>38</sup> <<https://adammaor.com/portfolio/the-sleeping-thousand/>>.

<sup>39</sup> Author's Zoom interview with Maor, 23 November 2021.

using this other body to speak, altering the host's voice in the process. Tales about spirits of the dead entering the bodies of the living are based on beliefs in transmigration and after-death existence, blurring boundaries separating life, death, and the spirit world. A dybbuk can be the soul of a dead sinner or of a pious man alike, entering another's body to fulfil or complete an injunction. The latter, a positive possession, is termed not *dybbuk* but *ibbur*, meaning impregnation.<sup>40</sup> The notion of the soul's impregnation rather than reincarnation, as well as an emphasis on a dead person's spirit rather than on the devil, is unique to Jewish conceptions of possession.<sup>41</sup>

One of the main signs of being inhabited by a dead soul is vocal (a woman sounding a man's voice, for instance). A dybbuk possesses matter as if the dead person, upon its return, is possessed of certain physicality or has volume. Residing in a body part, the dybbuk distorts it, forming a swelling and a lump – for example, in the tongue or throat – of the possessed. A dybbuk wanders within the body of the possessed and may cause it damage when departing, choking its host if leaving through the throat. For this reason the exorcist asks the dead soul to exit the body through the foot's pinkie toe. The dead is an invisible voice possessing visible signs, a voice that emanates from somewhere other than the mouth;<sup>42</sup> a voice, in other words, unlike that which the living possess.

An-Ski's play *The Dybbuk, or Between Two Worlds* (1910)<sup>43</sup> is a foundational Hebrew play, one of the most important Jewish theatre pieces of the twentieth century, and the signature piece of the Hebrew National Theatre. Up to today it forms one of the central tropes of Israeli theatre and of the culture as a whole. Habima's production of *The Dybbuk* became the magnum opus of a resurgent Hebrew culture. No other Hebrew–Israeli play achieved such mythological status.<sup>44</sup> Yoram Bilu offers a way to understand the unparalleled success of the play: '[it is] an indication of the immense gulf formed between the traditional past, now exoticized, and the modern, secular, and disenchanting present'.<sup>45</sup> Dorit Yerushalmi writes that the theatrical community and other cultural agents presented *The Dybbuk* as a mixture: the product partly of Zionist utopia, partly of the European avant-garde, it was essentially removed from the cultural and historical context in which it was created.<sup>46</sup> '*The Dybbuk* quickly became [...] an

<sup>40</sup> Gedalia Nigaal, 'The Dabbuk in Jewish Mysticism', *Daat: A Journal of Jewish Philosophy & Kabbalah*, 4 (1980), pp. 75–101 (p. 79).

<sup>41</sup> See Tamar Alexander, 'Love and Death in a Contemporary Dybbuk Story: Personal Narrative and the Female Voice', in *Spirit Possession in Judaism: Cases and Contexts from the Middle Ages to the Present*, ed. by Matt Goldish (Wayne State University Press, 2003), pp. 307–45 (p. 308).

<sup>42</sup> Nigaal, 'The Dabbuk in Jewish Mysticism', p. 81.

<sup>43</sup> The play was created by the first Hebrew theatre company (Habima, founded in Moscow) and based on stories and legends the author gathered from Jewish communities around Eastern Europe. See, for instance, Goldish, *Spirit Possession in Judaism*.

<sup>44</sup> Dorit Yerushalmi, 'Introduction: Histories of *The Dybbuk*', in *Do Not Chase Me Away: New Studies on The Dybbuk*, ed. by Shimon Levy and Dorit Yerushalmi, trans. by Inbal Shilor Shemesh (Assaph/Theatre Studies and Safra, 2009), pp. 9–24 (p. 9).

<sup>45</sup> Yoram Bilu, 'Dybbuk, Aslai, Zar: The Cultural Distinctiveness and Historical Situatedness of Possession Illnesses in Three Jewish Milieus', in *Spirit Possession in Judaism*, p. 358.

<sup>46</sup> Yerushalmi, 'Introduction: Histories of *The Dybbuk*', p. 9.

integral part of modern Jewish nationalist discourse.<sup>47</sup> Habima became a national symbol, *The Dybbuk* a Zionist allegory.<sup>48</sup> After World War II, writes Freddie Rokem, the play acquired new significance, evoking the wandering souls of the murdered whose graves are unknown. Israel, continues Rokem, is a society of those who remained alive, possessed by dybbuks.<sup>49</sup>

An-Ski's play *The Dybbuk, or Between Two Worlds* tells the story of the spirit of a young man, Hanan, who, following a mysterious death, enters into the body of Leah, a young woman. As mentioned, with regard to Rocca's opera *Il dibuk*, the two were promised to each other by their parents, but the promise was broken and the woman has been given away in marriage to another. After death, the soul of Hanan enters Leah, who yearns for him. A dybbuk is a spirit that has been sinned against and that demands that the injustice be made right. To be heard, the dybbuk speaks through the woman's body it possesses. Ultimately the dybbuk Hanan is exorcised but, in the process, Leah, his destined bride, dies. The two are united in death, a realm beyond social constraints. The second part of the title, 'Between Two Worlds', points to the belief in the spirit world, writes Shimon Levy, the belief that 'a person's spirit has an independent existence in another world'.<sup>50</sup> The play expresses a yearning for an existence beyond death. An-Ski's dybbuk centres on the lovers' eternal love for each other and their reunion after death, and not on the theology of sin and punishment. Even as it is tragic, the play, dramaturgically, writes Rokem, has the happy-ending structure of comic genres.<sup>51</sup> Death, argues Rokem, is perceived as the purest existence, whereas the living are the wrongdoers who broke the sacred oath.

It is clear from this brief account of dybbuk tales that the reference to them in the opera is circuitous. In the opera, a dybbuk is the soul not of someone who died but of someone in limbo, neither truly living nor completely dead. The operatic dybbuk of *The Sleeping Thousand*, the Palestinian, never had a voice. It possesses bodies of children in order to speak – but these bodies have no voice either. Unlike in dybbuk tales, many children are possessed all at the same time, so there must be many dybbuks. Both the children and the detainees are presented *en masse*, and neither group has a voice of their own. The correspondence between the children and the detainees is evident in the staging. Levy, who is also the stage director, explains that members of the audience occupy the twenty beds that make up the set. The beds are located at the back of the stage, facing the audience. At certain moments, the audience members occupying the beds stand for the sleeping Palestinian detainees, and at other times they stand for the Jewish population enduring insomnia.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>49</sup> Rokem, 'The Motif of the Dead Son: "The Dybbuk"' (1922), *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies*, 9 (1985), pp. 75–80 (p. 78) (in Hebrew).

<sup>50</sup> Shimon Levy, 'Epilogue: "Do Not Chase Me Away": A Note on *The Dybbuk* as Chaos', in *Do Not Chase Me Away*, pp. 267–73 (p. 268).

<sup>51</sup> Rokem, 'The Motif of the Dead Son', p. 77.

<sup>52</sup> 'The Sleeping Thousand: A Conversation'.

If we regard An-ski's dybbuk as a reference point for the dybbuk in *The Sleeping Thousand*, then Palestinians and Jews emerge as being analogous to the lovers, Hanan and Leah, and the dybbuk would be understood as a wished-for co-inhabitant. One would understand the end of the opera in light of the lovers' double death in An-ski's play: both sides of the conflict perish. A happy ending is then achieved – in a spiritual realm.

### Altered State of Consciousness

A child's voice, as we know, is a temporary phenomenon. If not interfered with artificially, as in the creation of castrati singers, the voice of both boys and girls will break.<sup>53</sup> A child's voice can thus be thought of as always on the way to being different from itself, as if its other resides latent within it. In *The Sleeping Thousand*, a dybbuk resides in each epileptic child, as if the voice were always there, dormant. Israeli children and Palestinian detainees are parallel: their expression is mediated; they have no voice of their own; they are voiced by another; their voices and bodies are disjoint; they are referred to in the plural; they are inflicted by sleep disorders.

By the end of the opera, the collapse of the Israeli authorities is complete. The experience of the sleepless Jewish population deteriorates into dysfunction. The Palestinians have created for themselves an alternative form of existence, an altered state of consciousness within a realm of deep sleep. Sleep resounds the dybbuk: during sleep and in possession, one is not fully present nor fully absent. In sleep and in possession, non-doing and withdrawal are at the same time means of resistance.<sup>54</sup> The political sci-fi future imagined in the opera offers up an existence on a spiritual level that would replace social and geopolitical reality. It constructs a 'dystopic utopia' to criticize, counter, and satirize the violence and deadlock of existing reality: '[T]he sci-fi dystopic imagination offers narratives of ongoing colonial, imperial, and violent threat. [...] [F]ear of the other and of invasion and contamination is indeed at the heart of the many [...] dystopias over the last decade.'<sup>55</sup> In *The Sleeping Thousand*, a dybbuk phenomenon forms operatic infants and, through them, infiltrates the opera as a whole. The image of children is vital for the realization of the dystopian utopic trajectory: 'dystopic not-yet-ness imagination should not be conflated with despair. It is rather a critical rethinking of political hope in a time of hopelessness and stagnation.'<sup>56</sup>

The Palestinian–Israeli conflict is extremely complex. I cannot detail the opera's relationship with the realities of the conflict. I will only remark on the possessed Israeli

<sup>53</sup> Sutherland, *Children in Opera*, p. 330.

<sup>54</sup> For the state of sleep as a form of resistance, see Katharina Rost, 'Drowning in Theatre Performances', *Performance Research*, 21.1 (2016), pp. 110–14; Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society* (Stanford, 2015); Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (Verso, 2013); Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Fall of Sleep*, trans. by Charlotte Mandell (Fordham University Press, 2009).

<sup>55</sup> Hochberg's article focuses on the sci-fi film trilogy of Larissa Sansour. Gil Hochberg, "'Jerusalem, We Have a Problem': Larissa Sansour's Sci-Fi Trilogy and the Impetus of Dystopic Imagination', *Arab Studies Journal*, 26.1 (2018), pp. 34–57 (p. 36).

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

children. One of the main stances dividing right- and left-wing political positions in Israel is, as expected, the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. For several years now, the conflict has not figured in right-wing political parties' platforms. Keeping the situation as is brings about what they wish for on the political plain. The left-wing parties, on the other hand, try to keep the debate over the conflict central to their political platforms, arguing that the conflict should not and cannot be escaped from. They claim – and here I reflect on the left wing's political stance in terms raised by the opera – all sides are haunted and possessed by the unending conflict. Doing nothing does not make it go away. The opera's articulation of hope is in the 'not fully formed psychologically, not totally socially immersed' children that in possession express a reset of terms and conditions. It is this, the opera tells us, that enables the imagination of a spiritual resolution on a different plane of consciousness.