

Opera: 'Anoush,' Classic Of Armenia, in Detroit

By JOHN ROCKWELL

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DETROIT, Oct. 31 — If David DiChiera and his Michigan Opera Theater are any guide, opera companies have found a new source for novelties. As a rule, companies seek fresh repertory from the past because audiences have rejected the present. But now Mr. DiChiera, who actually has a pretty good record when it comes to conservative contemporary operas, has hit upon the idea of introducing the favorite national operas of countries outside the operatic mainstream. This provides a potentially fertile new supply of repertory. And, as the entire page of the "Special Support Fund" listed in last night's program indicated — a page consisting almost exclusively of names ending in "ian" — local ethnic communities can form a new source of financial support.

The names ended in "ian" because the first of Mr. DiChiera's ventures in this direction is devoted to Armen Tigranian's "Anoush," which counts as the foremost national opera of Armenia. It is performed regularly there, and occasionally elsewhere in the Soviet Union, and one hears of periodic amateur efforts by American communities in the West. But last night's performance at the Music Hall was billed as the Western professional premiere. The opera is being repeated twice this weekend and on Wednesday, Friday and next Saturday.

In terms of libretto, the first Armenian national opera dates from 1868. But "Anoush" (1912 and revised up to the late 30's) was the first truly inspired by Armenian folk music. Tigranian, who was born in 1879 and died in 1950, never matched that level of success thereafter.

The story is a tale of peasant love and tragedy: a girl loves a shepherd, but her brother becomes enraged when, out of youthful enthusiasm, the lover violates the local code of honor and humiliates him by pinning him in a wrestling match. The brother shoots the shepherd and the girl throws herself off a cliff.

Its musical idiom is what makes "Anoush" special. Bordering on Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkey and Persia, Armenia demonstrated a fierce cultural independence over the centuries even as it was dominated politically by various outside powers and crisscrossed by Occidental and Oriental influences. Tigranian himself grew up listening to the music of wandering



Ellen Kerrigan

Oriental troubadours called "ashughner," and "Anoush" is permeated by Eastern-sounding modes, exotic ornamental shivers and a pervasive languid sadness.

It is this languidness that ultimately undercuts the dramatic intensity of the opera, however; too often, the music fails to reinforce the passions of the text. But the heroine's final mad scene is strong, and the opera as a whole remains charming and unusual, well worth the occasional encounter.

Detroit's performance was an honorable one. The work was slightly cut and presented in an awkward English translation that lapsed curiously at times back into Armenian. The direction by the translator, Gerald E. Papasian, was stiff, especially in the sometimes self-conscious bits of precise authentic detail. But the physical production of Franco Colavecchia (sets), Marjorie McCown (costumes) and Marilyn Rennagel (lighting) was very pleasing, and Raffi Armenian, a Canadian conductor, comported himself well.

The cast included Ellen Kerrigan, as a slightly hard-voiced but effective Anoush, Vincenzo Manno as her lover, Andreas Poulimenos as the brother, and a host of talented members of the company's Artist Intern Program in smaller roles.

Mr. DiChiera says he is looking at Moniuszko's "The Haunted Manor" for his next project, and at operas from Poland, Rumania, Spain and Serbia in the future.