

Volume 5: The Classical Klezmer—Rebirth of a Folk Tradition

What's in a name?

A lot, in fact—if the name in question is klezmer, and the thing it purports to describe is Eastern European Jewish folk music.

For most of its life, the word “klezmer” meant no such thing. A Yiddishized version of the Hebrew phrase for “musical instrument” (*k’li zemer*, lit. “vessel of song”), the term instead referred to the kind of musician (pl., “klezmerim”) who played at wedding celebrations and various secular Jewish events in Eastern Europe from the Middle Ages onward -- as well as at certain religious rites and, eventually, at Hassidic ceremonies and gatherings.

The instrumental music these klezmerim performed—music that appears in various guises throughout this volume of classical works from the Milken Archive—bore traces of the Ukrainian, Polish, and Gypsy tunes enjoyed by their neighbors throughout the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Pale of Settlement, that vast swath of czarist Russia where Jews were permitted to live in relative peace between pogroms. It also contained bits of the Turkish and Greek music that the klezmerim encountered during their peregrinations to Istanbul and the Black Sea coast.

Like millions of other Jews, many klezmerim came to America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and the music they brought with them remained popular among immigrant audiences. It quickly soaked up elements of early jazz and dance-band music, and graced scores of 78 RPM records. But it still wasn't called klezmer—just “Jewish music,” even if it wasn't really all Jewish. (For a first-hand account of the pre-klezmer klezmer scene, see the video interview that the the Archive's music director, Neil Levin, conducted with the fabulous Epstein Brothers. For a detailed scholarly account of the history and evolution of klezmer, both as a word and as a style of music, see Levin's essay, "Introduction to Volume 5.")

And then a strange thing happened. Klezmer—or rather, the music we now call klezmer—practically died. The Holocaust not only decimated the European communities that first nurtured the music; it also turned American Jewish ears toward other sources—like the newborn state of Israel, which inspired an entire genre of proud Zionist folk music. For decades, the older Yiddish tradition slumbered as if in a coma, roused only for the occasional wedding, bar mitzvah party, or Borscht Belt date.

And then, in the 1970s, something equally strange happened: klezmer—now used to describe the music, and not just the musicians who made it—came back to life, revived by a new generation of American klezmerim who were intent not only on mastering the old repertoire, but also on blending it with everything from reggae and salsa to funk and free jazz. Klezmer became a phenomenon, a staple of world music festivals, and a badge of

cultural identity for many younger American Jews—an ironic turn for a music that was once shunned for its Old World associations.

The resurgence of klezmer also led to a burst of activity amongst American composers who sought to bring the sounds of Eastern European Jewish music into the concert hall, much as their predecessors had infused art music with other forms of folk and pop. (Think of Bartok's use of Hungarian folk melodies, or Gershwin's use of jazz.)

In keeping with the diversity and flexibility of klezmer itself, no two composers in this Milken Archive volume have taken quite the same approach. And the music they have produced tells us much about the way in which creative artists transform well-worn materials into something fresh and new.

If you want to get a sense of what those materials might have sounded like in their native state, check out “A gas nign,” Ofer Ben-Amots’ faithful recreation of the kind of “street tune” that klezmerim once played to welcome guests to a wedding. Later on in his *Celestial Dialogues*, Ben-Amots introduces elements of cantorial song—the sacred source of many of the melodic ornaments, like the wailing *krekhstn* (“sobs”) and laughing *tshoks* (“folds” or “wrinkles”), that lie at the heart of klezmer.

The other composers in this volume draw on similarly well-sourced material. Paul Schoenfeld's *Trio for Clarinet, Violin and Piano* contains melodies that might well have been heard at a 19th-century Hasidic court, while his *Klezmer Rondos* quotes both Yiddish folk songs and Romanian dance tunes—a tip of the hat to the historic connections between klezmer and its geographic cousins. Yehudi Wyner's *Tants un Maysele* (“Dance” and “Little Song”) make use of “Hasidic-type dance rhythms” borrowed from a pair of piano pieces written by the composer's father, Lazar Weiner, and are informed by the son's own study of Jewish folk tunes. And Jacob Weinberg's “Canzonetta” and “The Maypole” are based on folk music from the Pale of Settlement that the composer collected and studied as a member of the Society for Jewish Folk Music in Moscow. (Visit the “Videos” section of Volume 5 to see Wyner himself describe how he turned *Tants un Maysele* into an homage to his father, and to watch performance videos of Weinberg's pieces featuring clarinet soloist David Krakauer and the Rundfunk Sinfonieorchester Berlin.)

Yet these borrowings and remembrances, though respectful, are really just fuel for the composers’ creative fire. No Jewish wedding band ever produced anything like Schoenfeld’s searching, modernist chamber music, with its 20th-century harmonies and virtuoso passagework; or played a festive wedding dance quite like Ben-Amots’ “The Celestial Freylakh,” with its dissonant flourishes and lush orchestral setting. These are works of contemporary art music that draw inspiration from American klezmer and its European antecedents, but transform them into something entirely new.

In that sense, Osvaldo Golijov’s *Rocketekya* perfectly captures the essence of modern klezmer and its role in American concert music. Meant to evoke the idea of a shofar, or ceremonial Jewish ram’s horn, “blasting inside a rocket—an ancient sound propelled

toward the future,” the piece is interpreted by a quartet that includes the klezmer revivalists David Krakauer on clarinet and Alicia Svigals on violin, along with electric-violin pioneer Martha Mooke and renowned tango musician Pablo Aslan on bass. (As one might expect, the rocket meets a Latin band in orbit.)

The combination of klezmer ornamentation, groovy Latin rhythms, and eerie electronic timbres exemplifies the inclusive, transformative nature of today’s klezmer: a centuries-old folk music that is moving intrepidly into the future, in as many forms and guises as composers can imagine.

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