

A Study of Klezmer Performance Practice Issues in Osvaldo Golijov's *The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind* for Klezmer Clarinet and String Quartet

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The music of Osvaldo Golijov (b.1960) displays his compositional depth and talent across both genre and style. Golijov frequently uses elements of klezmer, Jewish music that is traditionally transmitted aurally and fulfills both religious and historical purposes, to provide his works with an unusual vitality. This fusion of klezmer and classical music can be best seen in his *The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind* for klezmer clarinet and string quartet where traditional klezmer melodies are integrated into a standard chamber music setting. The klezmer performance practice issues in this work are highly problematic however, due in part to their reliance on aural tradition. I propose to analyze *The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind* by Osvaldo Golijov by focusing on the use of klezmer throughout the piece. Specific emphasis will be placed on recognizing klezmer harmonies, melodies, and rhythmic patterns. Ornamentation will be discussed at length, including comparing different performances of the same melodies. The production of special klezmer effects, such as the *Shofar* (ram's horn) and *Davenen* (wordless prayer), will also be discussed.

Golijov's interest in klezmer comes from his Jewish heritage. Life in Jewish communities in Argentina, Israel, and now the United States has allowed Golijov to observe various styles of klezmer performance and subsequently incorporate them into his own music: "I started writing the music I live with— music that from moment to moment is as direct as folk music, but has an architecture that leaves you at a different

place at the end.”¹ This blending of classical and klezmer in *The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind* spans five movements, and the title of the work refers to the Kabbalist prophet Isaac the Blind who dictated a manuscript that claims everything in the universe comes from the combining of letters in the Hebrew alphabet.²

The work’s use of klezmer also creates a strong sense of Golijov’s Jewish identity by recreating the history of Judaism through several different klezmer passages for different pitches of clarinet, giving each melodic section its own distinct sound, mood, and meaning:

The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind is a kind of epic, a history of Judaism. It has Abraham, exile, and redemption. The movements sound like they are in three of the languages spoken in almost 6,000 years of Jewish history: the first in Aramaic; the second in Yiddish; and the third in Hebrew. I never wrote with this idea in mind, and only understood it when the work was finished. But while I was composing the second movement, for example, my father would sit out on the deck with the newspaper, the sports pages, and every once in a while he would shout, “There you go! Another Yiddish chord!”³

Each klezmer section, while notated, shows only a basic melodic line and requires the clarinetist to embellish the music accordingly, raising serious issues of klezmer performance practice with regard to how each particular melody should be ornamented.

The tradition of aural transmission has made the study of klezmer and its performance practices highly problematic. Klezmer melodies were typically learned from other musicians and performances were routinely done from memory. Some Eastern European klezmer musicians, also known as klemorims, upon immigrating to the United

¹ Ken Smith, “Osvaldo Golijov: How Klezmer Revitalized a Form Started by Mozart and Created a Masterpiece,” *Gramophone* (September 2002): A3.

² Osvaldo Golijov, *The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind* (Kronos Quartet and David Krakauer, Nonesuch Records. N 79444–2. Compact Disc).

³ Ibid.

States published books of Jewish melodies to both aid in the teaching of Jewish music and profit from the growing popularity of klezmer. These music books, like Nat Kostakowsky's *International Hebrew Wedding Music* (1916)⁴ and Jack Kammen's *International Dance Folio* (1924)⁵, taught both non-Jewish and American-born Jewish musicians various klezmer melodies. These books did not teach performance practice though, leaving techniques such as embellishment to the discretion of the performer. The loss of many klezmer traditions due to the devastating persecution of Eastern European Jews during the first half of the twentieth century has further compounded these issues.

Although a number of sheet music books are now available for performing klezmer on the clarinet, these sources contain varying amounts of performance information. Almost all of these books contain transcriptions of melodies recorded mostly by clarinetist and Jewish big band leader Dave Tarras. *The Klezmer Repertoire for Clarinet, vol. I*⁶, by Mike Curtis, does not contain any performance notes while Edward Huws-Jones's *The Klezmer Clarinet: Jewish Music of Celebration* offers only scant information on each transcription and no assistance on how to ornament the music.⁷ *The Clarinetist's Guide to Klezmer*, by Tom Puwalski, discusses how to perform klezmer and places a strong emphasis on the need to study recordings.⁸ The best instructional source,

⁴ Nat Kostakowsky, *International Hebrew Wedding Music* (Brooklyn, NY: N. Kostakowsky, 1916; reprint, *The Ultimate Klezmer*. Arranged by Joshua Horowitz (Owings Mills, MD: Tara Productions, 2001).

⁵ Jack Kammen, *Kammen International Dance Folio No.1: Big Collection of Carefully Selected Songs and Dances Good for All Occasions* (New York: J. and J. Kammen Music Co., 1924).

⁶ Mike Curtis, *The Klezmer Repertoire for Clarinet, vol. I* (Rottenburg, Germany: Advance Music, 1996).

⁷ Edward Huws-Jones, *The Klezmer Clarinet: Jewish Music of Celebration* (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 2001).

⁸ Tom Pulwalski, *The Clarinetist's Guide to Klezmer* (n.p., Zephyr Publishing, 2001).

Joel Rubin's *Mazltov! Jewish-American Wedding Music from the Repertoire of Dave Tarras*, presents clearly written information on klezmer performance, as well as musical examples.⁹ Music books like these are useful in identifying various types of klezmer melodies and for studying harmony. Ornamentation, although it is included in some scores, still requires the study of recordings and live performances though. Klezmer musicians typically ornament their melodies through the use of glissandi, vibrato, trills, turns, and mordents, but since such embellishments reflect individual preferences and are rarely notated, their transmission thus remains an aural one.

The klezmer passages in *The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind* are remarkably similar to melodies found in the clarinet transcription books discussed above. Although the clarinet's solo passages contain a few ornaments in the form of grace notes, Golijov states in a performer's note that the clarinetist must, in the true nature of klezmer, create their own ornaments.¹⁰ Golijov further enhances his klezmer melodies and harmonies through the use of five different clarinets including clarinet in A, Bb, and C, basset horn, and bass clarinet. The prominence of the clarinet recalls the instrument's popularity in many klezmer recordings, and its flexibility allows for the production of specific sounds unique to klezmer and Judaism, such as imitating the *Shofar*. The addition of embellishments in such sections must arise therefore from the recognition of the melody type, the underlying harmony, and the traditional treatment of similar klezmer melodies on recordings.

⁹ Rubin, *Mazltov! Jewish-American Wedding Music from the Repertoire of Dave Tarras* (Mainz, Germany: Schott Music, 1998).

¹⁰ Golijov, *The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind*. Edited by Todd Palmer (Wien, Germany: Universal Edition, 2000).

This lecture-recital will begin with a brief biographical sketch of Osvaldo Golijov and his klezmer–influenced compositions. I will then briefly discuss the history of klezmer by focusing its tradition of oral transmission, its religious and historical importance, its differences between Eastern Europe and the United States, and the gradual development of “Americanized klezmer.” This discussion of klezmer will also include a quick overview on current trends in klezmer including the growing popularity of fusing klezmer with classical and popular music and the rise of modern klezmer ensembles.

The main focus of this lecture-recital will be on Golijov’s use of klezmer and its resulting performance practice issues in *The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind*. Specific klezmer melodies such as the *Bulgar*, *Doina*, and *Hora* will be discussed at length and supplemented with musical examples highlighting various combinations of modal scales and types of ornamentation. The production of sound effects such as the *Shofar* and *Davenen* and the different tone qualities and characteristics of the A, Bb, and C clarinet, basset horn, and bass clarinet will also be discussed. To conclude, I will discuss how the passages of clarinet klezmer in *The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind* can be identified, performed, and understood. I will also comment on how the improvisatory nature of klezmer allows the clarinetist to enjoy a certain degree of freedom in playing these sections of klezmer.

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