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Klezmer and the Klarinette

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(Musical example 1)

A number of years ago I had the opportunity to play a recital of music by Jewish composers. In putting together the program it was decided to include some klezmer music, a genre with which I was totally unfamiliar. An Israeli student had once give me a recording called "Jewish Soul Music" by Giora Feidman, which I had listened to with amazed incomprehension. However, I found it buried in a stack of records and listened again. Thus began a love affair with klezmer which has continued to this day.

Klezmer represents a microcosm of all that music has to offer--joy, pathos, dance, lyricism, virtuosity--it's all there, offered in pieces that usually last only a minute or two. Having no mentor to guide me in learning the style, I resorted to the means by which this music has been handed down from generation to generation: by listening to it and trying to reproduce it. Like jazz, klezmer is an aural tradition, and like jazz it can be neither taught nor learned from a book. Fortunately for me, I had chosen an absolutely marvelous model. Although I have since heard many klezmer clarinetists, most of them wonderful, the greatest impact came from the one I heard first. Giora Feidman is a true master and a fascinating individual, as I learned when he visited our campus a few years ago.

At first I was reticent to program klezmer on a typical "straight" recital, but I have made an amazing discovery--this music has absolutely universal appeal. I have played it for audiences ranging from children to octogenarians and the entire spectrum in between, and everyone loves it. The greatest compliment I can receive at a wedding or bar mitzvah is when someone comes up and asks me to which synagogue do I belong. I have to tell them that I am not Jewish, and I think my proudest moment was when a woman responded, "Oh, you must have been switched at birth!"

"Klezmer" is a Yiddish term, derived from the Biblical Hebrew "kley zemer" or "kelizemer", meaning "vessels of song" or "instruments of song". After the Middle Ages it came to be used as the designation for Jewish professional folk musicians. The plural is klezmorim. Today, the term denotes the genre of music played by klezmorim, and this definition is only a couple of decades old.

What we now call klezmer music originated in the 15th century in the shtetls, or small Yiddish-speaking communities, of Eastern Europe. Eastern Europe, stretching from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, was home to most of the world's Jews. It comprised parts of Hungary, Romania, Turkey, Bulgaria, Greece, Lithuania, Russia, Byelorussia, Moldavia, Bohemia, Poland, Germany and the Ukraine. It was actually a little world within a larger world--an empire without an emperor, and a kingdom without a king.

Most 19th-century klezmorim did not have formal musical training. The Russian conservatories, for example, were not opened to Jews until the late 1800's. However, many klezmorim were highly advanced musicians who read music and composed, and many of the bands had written arrangements. They entertained at weddings, bar mitzvahs, banquets, births, fairs, parades and various celebrations and social events. A Jewish wedding celebration could last as long as two weeks, which is longer than some marriages last these days.

From 1881-1924 there was a great wave of Jewish immigration to this country as Jews sought to escape economic, social and religious oppression in their homelands. But when the klezmorim arrived in America, both the function and the repertoire of their music began to change. The new society was much more secular. Weddings now lasted only several hours. Much of the older repertoire went out of usage. Eventually there were several developments which nearly destroyed the music, the most horrific of which was the Holocaust in

Europe. In the United States, a major factor in the demise of klezmer was the desire of immigrant Jews to assimilate into their adopted culture. They wanted "American music" played at their weddings and bar mitzvahs. I spoke with a friend who grew up in the 1950's, and she said that outside of an occasional hora, all she ever danced at bar mitzvahs was the bunny hop and the hokey-pokey. By this time, what was left of klezmer music and the klezmer band bore little similarity to the centuries-old Eastern European tradition from which they came. This remained the status until the mid-1970's, when a committed group of 2nd- and 3rd-generation Jewish-American musicians began to rediscover their musical roots and to breathe life back into klezmer music.

Although we have only a small body of written music dating no farther back than the early-to-mid-19th century, we do have a clear picture of the development of the klezmer style dating from the beginnings of the recording industry in the later 19th century. Be forewarned, however--the style is an eclectic, polyglot mix that defies classification because it has been in a constant state of flux. Over the centuries it has been influenced by Jewish liturgical music, Middle Eastern scales, the Yiddish language, hassidic songs, gypsy music, European art music, dixieland, ragtime, vaudeville, Broadway, swing, Latin dance, popular dance rhythms, and jazz. In addition it was colored by the folk music of the country which the performers called home. But at the same time it has remained a uniquely Jewish style and form of expression because it has been filtered through Jewish consciousness and primarily through Jewish musicians. It is traditionally music for dancing, but like jazz it can also be for listening as well.

To briefly address the makeup of the klezmer band, the instrumentation has never been standardized and can range in size from 2 to 15. Through much of the 19th century the favorite instrument was the hammered dulcimer. Later in the century the violin played the leading role, and the violinist tended to be the leader of the group as well. Early recordings of Jewish bands in America show that the instrumentation was influenced by popular ensembles. The first American klezmer recordings in 1915 were by a small military-style band reflecting the models of John Philip Sousa and Arthur Pryor. A recording in 1916 used violin, cornet, trombone, piano and drums. This is the exact instrumentation of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, with violin substituted for clarinet. By that time, however, the days of violin dominance were numbered. The primitive technology of the recording industry and increasingly larger performance venues mandated the use of louder instruments, thus favoring the clarinet and trumpet over the violin. In the 1930's the standard klezmer band in this country was clarinet doubling on sax, trumpet, piano and drums, with the possible addition of violin, trombone, and/or bass. By the 1940's all of the ensemble instruments were replaced by the accordion, so that the standard group became the clarinet, accordion and trap set. The most common instrumentation today includes the clarinet, violin, trumpet, tuba or bass, accordion, and percussion, along with the voice. Almost any instrument may be found, however, including the guitar, cymbalom, mandolin, and even the taragato.

There are a few things you need to know about how the music is played so that you can have a greater appreciation and understanding of it. Let's start with ornamentation. On the one hand it is extremely important, as expressed in this quote from David Krakauer, formerly of the Klezmatiks and now with his own group: "The music is about ornamentation and style. The ornaments create the Yiddish flavor and feeling. The shaping and bending of notes make it unique." On the other hand, Peter Sokolow, writing in the essay entitled *The Complete Klezmer*, makes this point: "In all melodic variation in klezmer style, THE MELODY COMES FIRST!! The ornaments decorate the melody, NOT VICE-VERSA. Respect the integrity of style and melody--too many dreydelkh spoil the tsholnt", which means "too many ornaments spoil the stew". Sokolow cautions that the tendency to overdo ornamentation results in a flashy but shallow performance. Regarding improvisation, he feels that the essence of klezmer is the interpretation of a pre-existing melody, and not pure improvisation. He also points out that klezmer is, above all, dance music. Tempos, therefore, should be moderate.

The primary types of klezmer music are all dance forms. The biggest single chunk of the repertoire is represented by the bulgar and frailakh. The meter may be 3/4 or 4/4, and the tempo is moderate to fast. The basic drum beat is a 3-3-2 rhythm. This is a Bulgarian rhythm, thus accounting for the name bulgar. Against this, the bass and chord instruments play an oom-pah two-beat. The sher ("scissors") and khosidl are slower versions of the bulgar, often with 16th-note melodies. The faster ones use the bulgar beat, while slower ones are played with a two-beat pattern. The zhok is slow and in 3/8 meter with the second beat left out: 1-3, 1-3. The doina is an ad lib piece in which a soloist or soloists play an almost cantorial improvisation, while the accompanists play held chords and/or tremolando. It is often included in a three-part unit: doina, zhok and bulgar. Although associated with Israel, the hora is originally a Romanian dance in triple meter.

Klezmer music is based on a system of modes which encompass the great majority of traditional tunes. The modes can change often within the same piece. We are going to demonstrate these by playing some music. The very first piece we played today *Shalom al Israel* (used as an introduction to this paper) used the pure minor scale, and we would like to play another example entitled *Ose shalom*. (**Musical example 2**) We would like to pay tribute to Giora Feidman by utilizing several excerpts modelled after his recordings. For the scale *Misheberakh*, which is Dorian with a raised 4th scale degree (**Musical example 3**), we will play part of a tune entitled *Azoi Tantzmen in Odessa*, as recorded by Feidman. Listen for both bulgar rhythms played by the left hand and right hand of the piano. (**Musical example 4**)

The Hungarian minor scale is similar to the Ahava Raba, which will be heard in a moment, but with the 7th scale degree raised. **(Musical example 5)** We will play part of a tune called Freilachs, recorded by Feidman. It also demonstrates the standard ending for a klezmer piece. This consists of a glissando or chromatic run into a three-note I-V-I pattern. The run or gliss is substituted for the penultimate measure of the melody. The I-V-I may be on consecutive beats or separated by a one-beat rest. **(Musical example 6)**

The scale called Molokh is the same as the mixolydian scale. **(Musical example 7)** I will play just a little of Feidman's composition for unaccompanied clarinet entitled Improvisation, which is an example of an unaccompanied doina. **(Musical example 8)** For the scale Ahava Raba **(Musical example 9)** we will close this lecture by playing another Feidman example. This piece describes two women. One is loud, over-bearing, opinionated, outspoken, and domineering, while the other is quiet, soft-spoken, sweet, meek and reserved.....and these two woman are related. This is called The Mothers-in-Law. **(Musical example 10)**