

Klezfest 2007 – First Impressions of a Klezfest Novice

Adrian Dobson, September 2007

For a Mancunian, journeys to London are both rare and a little daunting. True, London is little over two and a half hours by train from Manchester, but for one used to life in the Pennine foothills, London might well be in another country. It must say a great deal for my enthusiasm for Klezmer music and dance that this year I could no longer hold off travelling down to Klezfest to devote a whole week to this passion. So I rang Geraldine to reserve places for my wife, Judith, and myself, then spent several weeks wondering just what we had let ourselves in for.

A brief word about myself. I wasn't born into a Jewish family, but I did grow up playing and listening to lots of music. My own musical path took me through classical music, traditional British folk music, then Eastern European dance music before I discovered Klezmer. Over ten years ago now I chanced upon a Klezmer band leading a regular pub-session in New Mills in the Derbyshire Peak District, and since then my addiction to Jewish music has taken root, not to the exclusion of all other music, but it is the music which stirs me most. Klezmer seems to allow the expression of paradoxical and difficult emotions in a way seldom touched by British folk traditions.

I don't usually spend very much time in synagogues or churches, so it was comforting to find familiar and welcoming faces within the great doors of West London Synagogue. Judith had been asked to help out on the registration desk, which turned out to be the best possible place for us both, since we could welcome and chat to all the course participants as they arrived from exotic locations around London, and even more exotic locations beyond. I must congratulate the JMI team on giving us what must be the most satisfying job during the whole of Klezfest, I had lots of fun using bits of German and French; sadly my Russian is still very basic! Faced with all the basic questions that newcomers need to know, I even managed to find out most of the answers. And we could sit back, watch the tables fill, put faces to names, and names to faces, feeling ever more at home amongst our fellow musicians and dancers.

Of course you can't do everything on offer at Klezfest. You can only experience a fraction of what goes on, and everyone's experience is going to be so very different. But you can choose where you want to be, with whom and for how long. You can sing, dance or play. You can focus on rhythm, melody or ornamentation. You can learn more about how to play Klezmer on your particular instrument, about how to play for dancers and even about how to fuse Klezmer with other popular music. You can talk Klezmer, listen to Klezmer, sing Klezmer and dance Klezmer until you wake up in the morning with Klezmer tunes in your ears. On one occasion several Klezmer refugees even started a Klezmer Irish session in the synagogue basement.

The food at Klezfest deserves a chapter of its own. In some miraculous way, food appears at the right times. It is delicious, healthy, varied, vegetarian, fishy and fresh, and there is always more than enough. It looks beautiful, and tastes even better. It complements the music, lifts the spirits and satisfies the parts that even the hottest bulgar can't reach. It provides a focus for meetings, an excuse for amiable chat and the comforting feeling that someone out there cares. The food is made with love, served with love, and through sharing such wonderful food musicians, singers and dancers alike gradually become one big Klezmer family. The final evening's Shabbes Tish served as a celebration of our togetherness. We had learned to sing, dance, play music and share food

with complete strangers who within the space of a week had become our very dear friends.

Thanks must go to our tutors who gave generously of their enthusiasm and cheerfulness. Without their insights, enormous talents and good humour we would never have learned so much in so short a time. Thanks too has to go to Geraldine and all the staff of JMI who created the Klezfest environment with such meticulous care, forethought and kindness. I would also like to thank West London Synagogue for their generosity of spirit in allowing Jews and non-Jews alike to make music and feel very much at home together within such a special place. I do hope that in some way our music has left its traces there as inspiration for all those who have ears to hear the poignant magic of Klezmer.