

JMI instigates a Wild Wind Klezmer Weekend in Liverpool

I had not known at all what to expect so it was all exciting - and it was in Liverpool and local for me. Julia Nelki participant

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Yvonne Glass, the event co-ordinator reports on a new venture for JMI up North

Professor of Music at Liverpool University, Ian Williamson, a patron of JMI projects in Liverpool, welcomed the opportunity of engaging with JMI as part of the University's celebration of Liverpool 08 the European Capital of Culture.

With Geraldine Auerbach, he chose the route of basing the event on the University Wind band, and to work on a classical composition by Royal Northern College of Music composer Adam Gorb, called 'Yiddish Dances'. What JMI was to bring to the party was teaching actual Yiddish dances, putting the piece in its Eastern European klezmer context and bringing a dance band and dance caller to get the Liverpool students on their feet – imbibing the rhythms into their bodies before they even picked up their instruments. This was a shock to the system of the classical staff and players – but something that JMI insisted upon. They just had to trust us that this was the best way in to the music.

When we heard that our first choice of klezmer wind teacher, the clarinettist Merlin Shepherd would be away in Europe touring with the Frank London's Klezmer Brass Allstars – another intriguing idea crept into our heads – might it just be possible that the whole band could make a detour to Liverpool for the day of Monday 10 March to inspire the students – and all Liverpool with Yiddish Dances and Eastern European party music?

Not only was this feasible – just – as it turned out, but there was great enthusiasm from the University, and from the governors of Liverpool's pricelessly beautiful Synagogue in Princes Road, for a final concert to end the two day seminar, featuring the wind band together with the outside students who had joined for the contextual classes and rehearsals, and the Allstars.

We were fortunate to have the wonderful klezmer clarinettist from Manchester, Ros Hawley as the klezmer tutor. She was able also to come over to Liverpool in advance to work with Laura Hancock, the wind band conductor. We invited the Klezmer dance band from Manchester, led by Adrian Dobson (see article on Klezmer in the North) and his wife Judith Plowman as dance caller to get everyone going on the floor. So the stage was set.

After the new experiences of dance workshops on Sunday - the evening had been spent in the Peter Kavanagh – a well known pub where musicians are welcome to hang out and jam together with the drinking punters. Not only did we entertain all with klezmer, thanks to our wonderful Manchester dance band, but we had invited a gypsy band of four guitarists and a young boy with a heavenly voice to join us. They had barely a handful of English words between them. But who needs words when you can make such

wonderful music? Thanks to the infectious playing of the greatly missed Michael Kahan, a wild jamming session continued late into the night.

With literally minutes to spare on Monday, Frank London and the Allstars arrived at the synagogue, after with a terrifying landing at London City Airport – when I believe their plane was shown on television nearly being blown off the runway, a hair-raising train journey and a taxi driver taking them first, by mistake to the Greek Orthodox Church further down Princes Road! To say that spirits and nerves were high and jangling is an understatement!

Julia Nelki, an outside participant spoke for all when she said: 'I very much enjoyed the Wild Wind Weekend. I thought the mix of playing, dancing and singing was a wonderful way to get a feel for the music. I felt very privileged to play with the university wind band. I loved listening to Gorb talking which enriched the experience too. I was bowled over by Frank London's Klezmer Brass Allstars playing in the evening, especially Merlin, the clarinettist. The synagogue was a wonderful venue'.

Ros Hawey admitted 'It was an ambitious itinerary for a two day programme, but the participants were all enthusiastic and keen to engage in all the activities offered. The weekend certainly raised the profile of Klezmer music within the University and Liverpool itself. The final performance was a real achievement for all involved, particularly the wind band conductor Laura Hancock.

'For the wind band players, the fact that the evening concert meant that they entered a synagogue for perhaps the first time in their lives would in itself help to build an understanding and awareness of cultures that often live side by side within a large city but sometimes rarely come into contact with each other'.

Professor Williamson wrote: 'I am delighted that it proved such a splendid event. Our concert series 'Different Voices', of which it was part was at times a nerve wracking undertaking for a University Department more geared to teaching than concert promotion. Geraldine and you did wonders, because we should not have thought of Frank London, and his band, which made the evening for everyone. Apart from anything else, he showed that Klezmer was a living art which could develop and assimilate instruments (such as the electric guitar) which could not have been part of the historic experience.

There seems to be much potential for similar programmes to take place in Liverpool, focused on learning about Klezmer music and dance, traditional origins and context and for students to take on board both the learning of a new music tradition and, if they are coming from the western classical tradition, a new style of delivery and new educational approach. Rest assured JMI and Ros are on the case!

Merlin wrote: We had a great time. It was great to play in that shul and great to visit my local pub in Liverpool again!

Princes Road synagogue, a jewel in Liverpool City of Culture's crown – and that of the UK Jewish community, had perhaps never experienced quite such a night of Jewish music – the University wind band played 'Jewish' and the Allstars played klezmer and the congregation rocked and cheered!

